

Pitch Black

by [E. P. Lande](#) (November 2023)



Kent was happy alone. His wife, Millicent, was a nurse, practicing at their local hospital. She had taken the week off to visit her folks in Miami as she hadn't seen her parents in almost a year. Earlier that morning when they spoke, she told Kent that she would be on a boat sailing in the Caribbean and not to expect to hear from her for a few days.

While he was having his breakfast, Kent asked 'Alexa' to play the weather forecast, for he felt invigorated and thought a walk to the covered bridge would be just the right exercise. Mild temperatures, heavy rain, and high winds, followed by plunging temperatures and snow squalls were in the forecast. As long as the rains held off, Kent decided to risk the walk. It would be good for him. The forecast had warned there might be power outages. He was glad he recently had his generator serviced. Despite Millicent being in Miami or on a boat in the Caribbean, and although he was alone, Kent felt safe.

It started to drizzle as Kent reached the bottom of his hill. He began walking faster, hoping the drizzle wouldn't become more intense. But it turned into moderate rain as Kent approached the bridge—quickly picking up in force, accompanied by gusts of wind. On his return home, branches—some quite large—littered the road. Trees were swaying and the wind was howling. Kent started to run, feeling the cold rain penetrate his jacket, reaching his skin. As he neared his house, Kent heard the motor of his generator. He then knew the storm had knocked out the power—probably trees having fallen on power lines.

Kent went inside, emptied his pockets, removed his soaked clothes and decided to dry them. Holding his bundled clothes, Kent opened the door to his basement, turned on the light, closed the door behind him, and descended the stairs. He rarely had a need to be in the basement as Millicent handled the laundry chores. Other than storing their luggage, Kent couldn't remember the last time he'd visited the place.

Their basement was a warren of small rooms, one leading into the other, some with two or more doors leading to other rooms, all empty except for mice droppings, spider webs, and the occasional empty box. On seeing the boxes scattered about, Kent decided he would collect them all in one of the rooms—later.

Kent switched on lights as he walked from one room into the next, searching for the room that held the washer and dryer. When Millicent returns, he'll suggest she prepare a map of the basement. Better yet, he'll have their builder knock down the walls, creating a large space. Who needed all these rooms anyway?

He must have passed through at least eight or nine rooms and was beginning to give up hope of finding the appliances when he entered a room, switched on the light, and at its farthest end, there they were.

Walking quickly—he was near naked, only wearing boxer shorts and slippers—Kent put the wet clothes in the dryer, flicked the knob to 'Fast Dry,' and pressed the 'On' button.

The dryer sputtered, then stopped. The room lights went out. It was pitch black all around him. For a moment, Kent didn't understand what had happened. The generator had been on when he had entered the basement. Had it shut down? Well, it would turn back on in a moment, he decided.

Kent waited, but nothing happened. The lights remained off. He felt for his iPhone—to use the flashlight—but then remembered: he had left it on the kitchen counter when he removed his wet trousers before entering the basement.

Kent peered into the darkness that enveloped him. He couldn't distinguish anything, not even his hands. As there weren't windows in the basement—he must tell his contractor to install some—there wasn't any source of light. Had he closed the basement door behind him?

He began walking, thinking he would retrace his steps back to the stairs, but he quickly realized he had no idea where he was nor how to go back to the stairs. He didn't know if the door leading to the adjacent room was in back of him, to his left, to his right, or in front of him. Millicent was the one who used the basement for their laundry. He was unfamiliar with its interconnecting rooms.

Perhaps if he waited, the lights would go on. Maybe the generator simply had a glitch that would remedy itself if he was patient and waited. Why hadn't he taken his iPhone with him?

Kent tried to think about the situation he now found himself in. He didn't know how much time had passed, but finally he decided he had to find his way back to the stairs. He couldn't stay where he was any longer. He was cold.

If he walked—it didn't matter in which direction—he was sure to find a wall. Feeling his way along the wall, he would come to the entry to the room he was in. He would then walk through the entry and by feeling the wall of the adjacent room, he would find the door leading to the next room. Eventually, he would make his way out of the maze of interconnecting rooms, to the stairs.

Kent felt his way along the wall. He reached a doorway and walked through it into the adjoining room. He relaxed. He knew now that he would find his way back to the stairs.

Feeling his way along the wall, Kent reached another doorway and walked through this doorway into the adjoining room. Now he was excited. This was an adventure.

Feeling his way along the wall, Kent walked a bit more briskly, confident that he was making progress. In no time, he reached the doorway leading into the adjoining room. Without hesitating, he passed through the doorway and, feeling his way along the wall, he reached the doorway leading into the

adjoining room.

Kent repeated this several more times, always passing through a doorway and, feeling his way along the wall, finding another doorway, passing through it and feeling his way along the wall of the adjoining room he reached another doorway. He couldn't remember how many doorways he had passed through, but he believed he must be coming to the stairs.

With confidence, Kent continued. After passing through a few more doorways into adjacent rooms, feeling his way along the wall of the rooms he entered, he abruptly stopped. He had bumped into a piece of equipment. He felt its surface, tracing his fingers along its front—and hesitated.

It was the dryer.

What had happened? Kent remembered feeling his way along the walls of adjoining rooms. Why hadn't he come back to the stairs? Why had he returned to the room that had the washer and dryer? He had to think.

When he was looking for the clothes dryer with the bundle of his wet clothes in his arms, he had passed through at least nine or ten rooms. How many rooms had he passed through after the lights went out, walking from the laundry room, trying to make his way back to the stairs? He tried to count but became confused.

He started over, trying to remember, counting as he mentally traced passing through room after room. Was it seven, or eight? No, he thought there had been a couple more. That would make it ten or eleven. He thought that from the stairs to the room with the dryer had been eight ... or it could have been less ... or possibly more. He wondered how long he had been in the basement? Would he find the stairs? He needed Millicent. Where was she? He had to stop and think. It was cold down there. He started to tremble.

Kent began counting again. In his mind, he retraced his steps as he had passed from one room to the adjoining room, feeling his way along its wall until he reached the doorway, passing through the doorway, feeling his way along the wall of the room he had entered, reaching a doorway, passing through the doorway into another room, feeling his way along its wall, reaching a doorway, passing through the doorway ... did he go left or right? Kent couldn't remember. He had to stop and think. His teeth were chattering. He wanted Millicent.

Kent felt tired. He thought a rest might help him to think better. He couldn't catch his breathe. He gasped for air. He felt his heart pounding in his chest.

He lay down on the cold concrete floor. It was cold. He felt naked. As he lay on the cold concrete floor, he felt a chill.

When Kent woke up, he couldn't remember where he was. He was shivering and sweating. His forehead felt hot. Was he in his basement? How did he get there? He was cold. He got on his feet. He had to move. Perhaps he'd warm up.

Kent started to feel his way along the wall. He reached a doorway and entered the adjoining room. He felt his way along a wall until he came to a doorway. He passed through the doorway and, feeling his way along a wall, came to a doorway. He passed through the doorway and, feeling his way along a wall, reached a doorway. He passed through the doorway ... and stumbled. He was tired. He was shaking. He was cold. He needed to pee. He was thirsty. He was hungry. Where was Millicent? Why wasn't she with him? He needed to rest. He would rest; then he would start again.

Falling asleep, he thought of Millicent. They were in Paris, sitting in a *bateau mouche* gliding along the Seine, admiring all the old buildings passing by ... He liked his work ... He didn't like ... He was in college ... Did he and Millicent sleep together? Where were his parents? Millicent had a younger

brother. What was his name? They had a dog ... Beaver. Yes, the dog's name was Beaver. He was at summer camp, swimming in the lake. He had been told not to. He was blowing out candles. Was it his birthday? Miss Dewey ... she was his first-grade teacher ... He was ...

When Millicent returned from her boat trip and Kent hadn't left any message, she called their land line. It rang and rang, but Kent didn't answer the phone, and the answering tape didn't click on. She thought that strange, especially that the answering tape didn't seem to be working. She then called his cell phone. Her call went directly to his voice mail. She decided to wait; perhaps Kent was on his phone and would call her.

After forty-eight hours, with no contact from Kent, Millicent called Ryan, their closest neighbor who lived on the other side of the covered bridge. She asked Ryan if he had heard from or seen Kent. Ryan said he hadn't and told her about the power outage that had lasted for four days, but that the power had been restored. She asked him if he would go to their house and check, as she hadn't spoken to her husband in six days. She told him there was a key in the encasement of the lantern next to the front door.

An hour later, Ryan called her back and reported that the house was empty, but there were lights on, and that he hadn't heard any sounds. Millicent believed that something had happened to Kent. Kent needed her.

She took the next flight back to Vermont. On entering the house, she called out, "Kent ... Kent" several times, but there was no response. She began searching, entering each room on both the upper floor and the ground floor. When she didn't find her husband, Millicent thought of the basement.

She opened the door to the basement. The light was on.

Millicent called out, "Kent ... Kent," but again there was no response. She quickly walked down the stairs, calling out "Kent ... Kent." She became frantic; her heart was pounding. Kent might have fallen and was unconscious. She began to walk ... but hit an object in the shadows.

Kent was lying on his stomach, his right arm stretched out. Millicent leaned over him, whispering, "Kent," but her husband didn't answer. He felt cold to her touch. With trembling hands, Millicent rolled her husband over and checked his pulse. He wasn't breathing.

Her husband lay on the basement floor, his eyes wide open, his features frozen in a smile, a foot from the base of the stairs.

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E.P. Lande was born in Montreal, but has lived most of his life in the south of France and Vermont, where he now lives with his partner on a 500-acre farm, writing and caring for more than 100 animals, many of which are rescues. Previously, he taught at l'Université d'Ottawa where he served as Vice-Dean of his faculty, and he has owned and managed country inns and free-standing restaurants. Recently his stories have been accepted by more than a dozen journals including *Bewildering Stories*, *Archtype* and *Literally Stories*.

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