**Kaitawa**

**By Bernard Beckett**

Everybody is afraid of something, and everybody believes their own fear is special. But it never is. Everybody’s fear, in the end, is exactly the same.

Jasper’s mother was afraid that people would discover she could not read, and would laugh at her. Jasper’s older sister, Lucy, was afraid of growing to one day look like her Aunt Michelle, who moved through life with a permanent scowl on her face. Jasper’s father was afraid of unexpected bills. Jasper’s cat, Marshmallow, was afraid of lightning and fireworks (but not cars, which worried Jasper a great deal).

Jasper’s fear was harder to name. It was more of a feeling than a thing. He was afraid of the feeling of night falling, of the darkness closing in a round him, just after his mother had told him his bed time story and tucked him in and kissed him good night. The light would click off and Jasper would feel the world change shape around him. Sounds he never heard in the daylight would creep into his mind. Quiet whispers in the trees: unseen forces secretly plotting and making plans. There was a snuffling sound beneath his window: some dark creature of the night waiting patiently for the boy within to fall asleep. Jasper’s father had investigated this sound on three separate occasions and proclaimed it to be ‘just a hedgehog.’ Adults are good at sounding certain, even when they don’t know the answer. Most of the time, adults don’t even know what the question is. Something else frightened Jasper when night fell, a feeling in his chest, as if the air was growing thinner and harder to breathe, as if some great invisible weight was pressing down on him.

He tried to explain these things to his parents, and they always would listen and nod, and patiently turn the light back on and pretend to check behind the curtains. Then they would offer him a drink of water. As if you could get rid of the fears inside your head by simply drowning them. It didn’t make Jasper any less afraid. It just made him want to pee. It did teach him something important though: you can’t always rely on grown-ups.

So Jasper turned to technology. He ‘borrowed’ his sister’s phone and set it up on his pillow, with the camera facing the window. Before he fell asleep he pressed ‘video’, certain he would finally get incontrovertible evidence of the unworldly creature that was visiting him each night. But he rolled in his sleep and knocked the phone to the floor, where it captured a long and uneventful close-up of the carpet weave. You can’t always rely on technology.

Perhaps it might have ended there. He might have grown used to the fears, or grown out of them, the way some people suggested he would. Perhaps those were the same thing. But then he had the strangest dream. Admittedly, dreams are mostly strange, animals speak, time jumps and stretches, people fly and run as fast as they can without moving at all. But this dream was strange for a different reason. When Jasper woke the next morning he could remember every last detail. It was almost like, just by closing his eyes, he could replay the entire dream back in his head. Like YouTube, but without the ads.

In the dream, he heard a noise in the garden and walked out the sliding door in his bedroom and stood in the complete darkness of the back lawn, somehow completely unafraid. A small fuzzy light, the size of a tennis ball, hovered before his head, and it spoke to him. And here is what it said. Exactly. Word for word.

Jasper, I know that every night you are frightened. And I can help you. There is a place you know, and in it there is a place you do not know. You must walk to your favourite flying fox early in the morning, just before the darkness has broken, and look for my light. That is all you need to do to understand your fear. Be brave.

Jasper went over the words again and again, tripping each time in exactly the same places, feeling the same sense of hope and dread, stretching  him out, pulling him in opposite directions. ‘In it there is a place you do not know.’ That felt like a riddle. And in Jasper’s experience, the things most often hidden in riddles were tricks. ‘Just before the darkness has broken.’ That was the thing that caused him most worry. The flying fox was easy, that meant Kaitawa Reserve, but it was ten minutes scoot from his house, and that was in the daylight. But before the darkness has broken? How would he even be awake then? And finally, every time he thought of it, he came back to the same single word. ‘Understand.’ What did that mean, that he would understand his fear? Perhaps that would be a good thing, but perhaps it wouldn’t. It seemed possible to Jasper, the more he thought about it, that visiting Kaitawa Reserve was a very bad idea indeed. But that didn’t mean he could stop thinking about it.

The next night the fear was as bad as it had ever been, and the night after that it was even worse. He still couldn’t decide whether to follow the message in the dream and so he decided he would leave the whole thing to fate. So, before he went to bed, he wheeled his scooter out of the garage and hid it at the side of the house, and he took a long drink of water from the largest glass he could find. He remembered hearing that in the days before alarm clocks, soldiers would make themselves wake early by drinking water before they went to sleep. He didn’t know whether this would work or not, and that was the point. If the water woke him, then he would follow the dream. He was leaving the decision up to his bladder.

It worked. Jasper woke in darkness, dressed in the clothes he had hidden under his bed, scooted silently out onto the footpath and had the longest, most satisfying pee on his neighbour’s rose bush. He checked his torch was still in his jacket pocket, along with a chocolate bar he’d stolen from his father’s not-so-secret stash and his pocket knife, and pushed himself onwards, on a collision course with fear.

By daylight Kaitawa Reserve is a place of happiness. There is a children’s playground and flying fox that whizzes across a stream, a stream that gurgles and splashes its way across small sharp stones, and is exactly the right amount of overgrown for small and intrepid explorers. The grass is long and tickles when you chase through it, and the bush spills down from the hills, making a secret hideaway of every twist and turn. It is a place of squealing laughter and the sorts of scratches that sting but do not require a Band-Aid. Of parents on cellphones, absent mindedly promising their children ice creams later, if they play kindly with one another, and school groups with hats and sunscreens and buddies for the walk back to class.

At night, just before the darkness breaks, Kaitawa Reserve is nothing like that. The details smudge, one into the other. The darkness is deep and forbidding. Twigs break underfoot with a sound like gunshot, that for a moment stops the heart. Branches stroke your face without warning or apology. The land becomes rutted and unpredictable. There is no left, no right. No up or down. The further Jasper moved from the last streetlight, obscured by the thick foliage of paired pohutukawa, flashing a last distress signal in the wind, the more impenetrable the shadows become. Jasper pressed on. He had known it would be frightening. And he’d promised himself he would move forward.

He knew the area well. He was a local and he often played there, and once he had calmed down enough to think clearly, he realised the stream was the key. While the other sounds of the night were indistinct and unreadable: the stop start noise of distant traffic, the rumbling thunder of an overnight freight train, the cooling wind shuffling the leaves over head; the stream was speaking to him. Over here, it said. This way. I am still here. Even in the night time, I am here.

Jasper did not turn on his torch. Not yet. It would make it easier to see, but it would make him easier to be seen, too. And he wasn’t sure that was the best idea. He walked carefully down the slope towards the sound of the water, imagining exactly where he was with every footstep. Believing. Here, he told himself, the water is close. And there, he waved his hand overhead into the darkness. There is where the wire of the flying fox runs.

His foot slipped down a bank and he felt the cool of the stream seep into the toe of his sneakers. He had made it. Now he could turn on the torch. If he kept it pointing low, at the water, it would not be visible from the road.

After the inky black of night, the light of his torch was brash and piercing. The water beneath him glowed white, illuminating a fat eel lowly twisting its way up the current. Jasper edged his foot out of the stream and watched dark shadow move confidently back into the depths and disappear, untroubled. He wished he felt the same.

There is a place you know. And in it there is a place you do not know. So Jasper was looking for something unfamiliar, but he did not know what it was. Perhaps it was the eel. Perhaps it was the whole place. At night, all of it looked unfamiliar. He turned slowly around, a 360 degree rotation, looking and listening for something, anything, that might be a clue.

There came a humming sound, so low that at first he thought he was imagining it. When he turned upstream, to the place where he thought the sound was coming from, he saw a light. A small fuzzy light, the size of a tennis ball. Familiar. It moved slowly away from him, following the course of the path, then hovering, as if waiting for Jasper to follow.

Jasper moved after it. His body felt strange and mechanical, as if this too was a dream. The path was smooth underfoot, and what he had first thought was his eyes adjusting to the darkness was, he now realised, the very first of the day’s light leaking into the eastern sky. He could see shapes now, make out the trunks of trees. He switched off his light and stumbled forward.

Again the light stopped, swaying slightly from side to side, as if impatient. Jasper moved closer and, just when he was almost close enough to touch it, it ducked off the path and into the bush, like a child playing chase. An irritating, teasing, faster-than-you, child. Jasper had barely travelled ten metres from the path when he saw it. Here, in the place he knew so well, a place he did not know at all.

A strange sculpture, or perhaps a shelter of some kind, a nest even, Jasper had no proper word for it. It looked like nothing he had ever seen before and yet, at the same time, it looked as if belonged here. As if there was no other place it could belong. Yes, shelter was the best description, Jasper decided, drawing closer. Its bottom was a kind of large bowl, woven together from long thin branches, carefully shaped and yet haphazard. Its roof was even more perplexing, a tarpaulin stretched across the frame, supplemented by offshoots of wood and metal, each piece random and yet still fitted perfectly into the greater shape. A contradiction, Jasper thought. He liked naming things with unusual words. If I were to call this something, I would call it a contradiction.

Jasper moved forward. He still did not know what it was he was doing here. Was there a way into the structure, and would he dare enter it? He reached out and touched one of the switches, half expecting his hand to pass right through, but it was as solid as any piece of wood might be, its bark smooth and night-cool. He felt bolder now that he was sure it was a solid thing. He moved to his left, looking for an entrance.

The sound was unmistakable, the snapping of a twig in the bush directly behind him, followed by a single heavy footfall, a person stepping back from the sound they had made, standing still and silent, listening for a sign they’d been heard.

There are moments where we are called upon to be brave, or maybe foolish is a better word; often they are the same thing. Jasper moved quietly back around the structure, his breath held, his eyes straining to take in the details of the dawning world. He stopped, listened, imagined a person on the opposite side of the magical shelter, doing the same. He turned, scanned the space behind him, crept backwards… one step, two… collided. It was a young boy, about his size and age, no one he recognised from school. In their panic the two of them became entangled, twisting together and falling noisily to the ground. As if that wasn’t frightening enough, somewhere nearby, a third child screamed, and a fourth shot out from the bushes and set running up the park, as fast as her small legs would take her.

‘Sorry,’ Jasper muttered. In times of danger he reverted to politeness, even though he understood that wasn’t always the best survival strategy.

 ‘For what?’ the other boy answered. ‘And who screamed?’

 ‘Sorry, that was me.’ A girl, their age too, as best Jasper could tell, stood up from her hiding place, crouched beside the structure.

 Jasper got back up and offered her his hand, as he had seen adults do with strangers. ‘My name is Jasper.’

 ‘Annika.’

 ‘I’m Troy.’ The boy stood and smiled and then looked quickly to the ground. Silence filled the gaps. They heard the fourth child, edging her way back to the group.

 ‘Hi,’ she emerged from the trees and gave an apologetic half wave. ‘I’m Maia. You frightened me.’

 ‘I think we all frightened each other,’ Jasper answered.

 ‘And, what are you doing here?’ Annika asked. ‘What brought you here?’

 It was a question for all of them and Jasper, like the others, hoped somebody else would answer. In the end it was Troy who was bravest.

 ‘It’s stupid,’ he said. ‘You won’t believe me.’

 ‘We might,’ Jasper urged, but the boy shook his head.

 ‘Nah. I had a dream.’

 ‘About a ball of light?’ Annika asked. Troy looked at her startled.

 ‘How did you know?’

 ‘And it spoke to you,’ Maia added.

 ‘It said that at this place you know,’ Jasper said, keen now to share his credentials...

‘There is a place you do not know,’ Troy muttered.

‘A place to understand your fear,’ Maia offered. She looked around at the others, apparently unable to quite believe any of this was happening. Jasper knew how she felt. They all did.

 ‘What are you afraid of?’ Jasper asked. The words snagged in his dry throat and he had to cough to get them out.

 ‘Of getting lost in a crowd,’ Annika told them. Jasper could see how foolish she felt, saying it. Fears always sound foolish, when spoken out loud.

 ‘Of having my friends find out I take ballet lessons,’ Troy said, without being asked.

 ‘That my parents will stop loving each other,’ Maia said, with a shrug too small to dislodge the weight of it.

 ‘I am frightened of the dark,’ Jasper said. He’d never put it like that before, and now that it did, it felt smaller somehow, less terrifying.

 ‘So why are we here?’ Maia’s question was the obvious one, and Jasper had no good answer.

 ‘There is a book,’ Annika said. ‘Inside the shelter. On its cover it just says Kaitawa. I wasn’t brave enough to open it.’

They knew what came next, even if none of them was courageous enough to suggest it. In the end it was decided with a simple nod, from Troy to Annika, who moved quietly to the other side of the structure. The others followed without discussion.

There was barely room for the four of them inside and they sat close, Annika in the centre, the book held closed in her shaking hands. Jasper noticed how good it felt, to be this close to other people. Warm and comforting. The opposite of fear.

‘Open it,’ Jasper whispered.

Maia took his hand and gave it a small squeeze. Jasper placed his arm around Troy’s lightly shivering shoulders. They moved closer still. Their breath mingled.

Annika opened the book and the mouths of four children moved silently as they read together the first hopeful lines:

Everybody is afraid of something, and everybody believes their own fear is special. But it never is. Everybody’s fear, in the end, is exactly the same.