

Night of the four foxes

Reflecting on the magic of a cold winter's night

London in the dead of winter is dark and damp. Wet brick and harsh metal merge into a heavy grey fog, rapidly consuming all sign of life with a ravenous hunger. So accustomed do we become to the grey that colours suddenly appear ghastly and out of place. Memories of soft, warm summer rain are wiped out by an icy wind and a constant, aggravating spritz to the face. In winter, the walk to the corner shop becomes an outright battle with the elements.

It's enough to make you want to stay inside, and well, most of us do. While we may relish a brisk stroll through the countryside every now and then, we retreat to our cosy pubs and teacups as soon as Night swoops in. We leave our streets to the wild — to the bats and rats, owls and nightjars, all swooping, scurrying and singing in the dark. And it is a great shame too, for it is often out there, in the dark and in the cold, where we truly connect with nature.

An unlikely meeting in the park

On a particularly cold night in January, my husband and I left the lonely Kennington tube stop in a hurry. It was well past 10pm and though the rain had just ended, a lingering mist and harsh wind kept us shivering through damp clothes and hair. In that moment I hated London in the winter. I loathed it for the harsh concrete and crowded streets; for the unnerving stillness that followed the wind and chilled me to the bone. I thought of hot summer nights back home in America, where a warm breeze moves gracefully through the trees.

Then, as we crossed the street and entered the sprawling fields of Burgess park, the night began to transform. All was quiet when we entered the path through the trees. The mist smothered all sound – even the wind had gone silent. The air seemed to take on a life of its own and we found ourselves whispering in the dark.

A soft rustle of leaves to our right stopped us in our tracks. Instinct took over, and we went still. Without sound or warning, a ghostly apparition exited the trees and crossed our path. In the dim glow of a streetlamp, we could just make out its slender silhouette.

Spotting us, though still and silent as we were, he froze in place, tail stiff and low. He was calm and unafraid. We stared at each other for some time, before he turned in a flash and disappeared into the night. I had seen foxes in London before, but never like this, so close and so clearly. Little did I know that would only be the first sighting that night.

As we exited the park and entered the harsh lights of the residential street, I nearly ran into a toppled-over bin. Rubbish lined the street gutters. Evading the sludge, I moved too quickly and crunched on a discarded bottle, and that's when we saw him. Or he saw us. Standing behind the bin, he was all tense, lean muscle and a cool, watchful gaze. Then suddenly he was off, flying like an arrow beneath the hedges.

Treading carefully now, we spotted another fox glide across the road from the opposite side. This one was smaller, tense and nervous. He stood in the grass, then tumbled over to scratch himself. Eyeing us for just a moment longer, he dashed off to join his brother or sister in the hedges.

A ghost in the night

Ecstatic with our incredible luck, we spoke in hushed whispers, hoping to have just one last meeting of the foxes. We walked silently through a quiet street, where row after row of terraced houses painted a surreal scene in the glow of the streetlamps. Each step was bringing us closer to home, to a warm blanket and a cup of tea, but I found myself wanting to make the night last.

Then, just as we turned the last corner, I felt the spine-tingling sensation that we were being watched. I scanned the terraced windows for any sign of life but saw only drawn curtains and empty gardens. To my left, a thick brick wall followed the pavement and towered over us, so that I could just barely make out a fuzzy moss-covered top lined with rose bushes. And just as I looked up, there was a rustle in the dead thicket, and the final fox of the night revealed himself.

His face was strikingly pale against a copper coat, broad and flat. Large, dark eyes peered down upon us. Calm and serene, he stood as still as a statue, and so did we. Time seemed to slow down as we watched him, waiting to see what he would do next. His gaze was supernatural, almost otherworldly. He was a phantom from the shadows, an ethereal being from the pages of ancient Celtic lore. Then in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

A ghost in the night.

Walking home, I no longer felt the sting of the cold.

A return to the night

Living in a big city can dull the senses and threaten our natural connection with nature. It doesn't take long for the light and noise to creep into the psyche, until we forget to look for the stars or admire the melody of a songbird. If we're not careful, the daily grind can blend our souls with the grey, making us as hard and cold as metal. We become blind to the little moments of magic in the natural world. In the winter, the risk of missing out is even greater. City streets that appear void of all life by day, come alive at night. Foxes, badgers, deer and birds are all around, watching and waiting — if we dare to step outside, into the dark, into the cold.