

Things That Go *Beep* in the Night

John K. Nixon

Beep... Beep...
Beep... Beep...
There it was again. Four beeps in quick succession. I had heard them a few minutes before, as I was surfacing from a deep sleep, but had assumed they were part of a dream. This time there was no mistaking them: loud, strident, insistent.

I rolled over in bed and reached out to switch on my bedside lamp. The sound seemed to emanate from that side of the bed. My alarm clock showed almost 3 a.m. as my eyes scanned the nocturnal jetsam washed up on the bedside table: wrist watch, wallet, coin purse, house keys, car keys, eyeglasses, a partially disembowelled box of facial tissues, several crumpled credit card receipts, yesterday's To Do list, hearing aids, two booklets of transit tickets, small note pad and a ball point pen. On the floor lay a copy of *The Economist*, a couple of newspaper articles and a paperback book or two. Everything seemed normal and deathly quiet except for the subdued ticking of the alarm clock. I rubbed my eyes and stared again. No change. I must have been hallucinating, I decided, and switching off the lamp, I rolled over to resume sleeping.

Three or four minutes later, there they were again, as loud as before. I flung back the bed covers, swung my feet onto the floor and flicked

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on the light. I stared again at the alarm clock, which now showed a few minutes after 3 a.m. For some reason I suspected that it was to blame, and even checked that the alarm had been set (it had not). I had never heard an alarm clock uttering staccato beeps like that; the alarm was always a high, shrill continuous

ringing, almost beyond my hearing threshold. For a moment I thought that my hearing aids, carefully stored in their container, had somehow gone berserk and I even opened the container to check on them. There they were, as unobtrusive as ever. It all seemed depressingly normal.

Could it be something to do with my car remote key, which has a panic button to press in case of an emergency? I had tried it once and, as I recall, it emitted a loud beep at intervals. Perhaps someone was trying to break into my car. I quickly put on my slippers and, grabbing my dressing gown from the closet, I stepped through the bedroom door onto the upstairs landing. In the ceiling above my head was a smoke detector. I looked at it suspiciously. I had heard it a few times when it was tested, but the alarm was a piercing continuous shriek, not an intermittent beeping sound. Could it have malfunctioned now? It gazed down at me with an almost mocking smile on its smooth, white,



Spoiler Alert!

Bela Lugosi never went beep in the night in any of his vampire films.

[Photo: Wikimedia Commons.]

moon-shaped plastic face. I quickly eliminated that as a potential culprit.

As I padded down the stairs to the ground floor, my mind was churning with uncertainty and doubt. Gingerly opening the front door, I peered outside. There was my car, parked in front of the garage. All was eerily quiet with no signs that anything was amiss.

I retreated upstairs with my mind in turmoil, having exhausted all logical avenues of exploration. For a fleeting instant I considered that some alien life was trying to communicate with me. I quickly dismissed this as too outlandish an explanation for my skeptical mind. On the other hand, could it be some dear departed relative who was trying to establish contact? My inherent distrust of superstition and the supernatural and my confidence in the application of reason and logic to explain phenomena were now under siege. I began to suspect that I was on the verge of losing my sanity.

Approaching my bedroom I heard those dreaded four beeps once again. As I entered the room, my gaze fell on the dresser against the wall beside my bedside table. There on the top was the usual chaotic collection of old framed family photographs, a hairbrush, a small pile of safety pins, some loose buttons and my camera. Just behind the camera was the outline of my cell phone in its black plastic leather case.

My hand shaking, I reached for the phone, opened the magnetic snap lock on the case and withdrew the smooth plastic device. As I

flipped open the lid, a faint glow emerged and some letters flashed on the small screen: *Battery Discharged*.

It was one of those rare moments of truth when everything became crystal clear and all the doubts and contradictions that had consumed my thoughts and challenged my self-confidence just melted away. I had used my cell phone several days before and obviously had forgotten to shut it off before replacing it in its case. Subsequently the battery had slowly drained – the first time that this had happened to me since I acquired the thing less than two years before.

As I crawled back into bed my mind was flooded with an overwhelming sense of relief that reason and logic had prevailed, mingled with a sense of embarrassment that I had failed to think of that simple explanation earlier. Reaching again to switch off my bedside lamp, I drifted off to sleep with the slightly modified version of an ancient Scottish prayer coursing through my brain:

*From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-leggedy beasties
And things that go Beep in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us! •*

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