

The Monster and Under the Bed

The one volume tome is heavy in my hands. It is my first time reading *The Lord of the Rings*. Mum took me to the pictures to see the animated film version in 1978. Five years of avid reading has built my literacy up to an attempt of the book. A slight twelve-year-old, I am sitting on the sofa, enjoying the warmth in the sitting room; the three-bar electric fire is the only heating in the house. Waiting for how this evening will play out, I am carrying more than the weight of the book.

I hear the key at the lock of the front door just after 8. It doesn't enter the lock on the first try. He has been out all afternoon and evening. Checking my jeans pocket, I find it empty; I dart across the living room to the hankie box on the middle shelf of the fire surround. By the time I sit back down, book in hand, mum's boyfriend has managed to get the front door open. Against the rustle and clink of a carry out in a plastic bag he shouts, "Alright, it's party time!"

I put a happy smile on my face.

He keeps me up for hours after my Saturday night bedtime. The second time I escape to the loo, the mirror shows the skin below my eyes becoming darker while my skin becomes paler; my panda eyes, which I get when I am emotionally tired.

He is sitting on the sofa beside the wooden fire surround and moves only to change side on the album he is playing. Dylan next. As ever when he is drunk, he is rambling on and on while simultaneously demanding that I "listen to the words." I don't understand what Dylan is singing about; I've never been in a big brass bed. Regardless, I must try to answer any question about either the song or his rambling. I cry silently. The single handkerchief contains my tears and the stray snotters that run from my nose when I cannot sniff them back in time. To get a new one would mean stepping way too close to him.

He gets up and changes album; Springsteen now. *Thunder Road* bellows out. I wish I was on *that* bike, far away.

But I can't run while my little brothers live here. At least they are in bed. There are times when I hate them for being allowed to have a normal bedtime. Mum has been able to leave the sitting room at times; to put the boys to bed and to make cups of tea for the man who cannot clap in time. When it is almost midnight, I look at mum. While her face is 20 years older than mine, she is not much taller than me, and has a slender build. But there are differences between us. Her hair is poker straight while mine has a natural kink to my mid-brown bob. I'm going to the toilet I tell mum. She nods that I can stay upstairs.

I leave them sitting on the sofa. I walk quickly past their ground floor bedroom, trying to ignore the smell of sweated vodka that sours it. Once upstairs, I pause long enough to glance in the boys' bedroom. They are safely asleep. I can see the profile of ten-year-old Malcolm - the stress frown wiped away in the grace of sleep. John is on his back, still cherub like as he heads towards his sixth birthday. Turning the corner in the L shaped hall, I walk past the loo as the flush might remind mum's boyfriend that I am awake.

My box bedroom is the last room of the upstairs hall, just past the door to the loo and the big airing cupboard opposite. The bedroom smells slightly foosty and the cotton curtains are damp, slick to the touch. Balancing silence and speed, I get into my pyjamas. I slide into the cold bed. My slim frame makes a pocket of air that slowly warms the sheets.

My bed has a wooden frame and a big gap underneath. There are layers of blankets weighing me down. I've been in the bed for about 15 minutes, not long enough to drop into sleep when I'm shivering - I didn't say anything stupid tonight. I didn't do anything to make him angry. Maybe he'll fall into a sleep before mum says something to upset him. Tomorrow is Sunday so it's okay to be tired, and I don't have much homework left to do. Thank God I'm beyond homework for a Monday morning being 'What did you do at the weekend?' At least the boys are asleep. I didn't say anything stupid tonight.

My bedroom door is wide open. In the turn of the hall, the lampshade on the landing light is orange, so it casts a vivid glow into my room that I can use to read. The edge of the open door is beside the head of the bed, so I can push it closed just by moving my right arm.

There is a bookshelf just above my head. From the time I hear the sitting room door opening to an adult getting up the stairs, I can tuck a book into the space on the bottom shelf. The gap is beside Asimov's Foundation, Orwell's 1984 and Blyton's The Famous Five. I try to focus on the pages of Tolkien. The Fellowship are passing through Moria, and Gandalf is trying to work out where they should go next. Born To Run is turned onto its second side.

There is a dramatic shift in tone downstairs.

Have you said something stupid mum? But it isn't that easy. Who knows what will set off a rage? I can hear him roar at her. Should I go wake the boys? Get them ready to run? Will the Galbraith's open their door this time? No! It's too dangerous. I'll never get the boys safely out the front door, and if he comes upstairs angry... don't think about that. Listen!

My heart rate is climbing, and my mouth becomes dry, but I control my breathing; pretending to be asleep has helped before. I push my door to close it over without fully shutting. Shaking hands fumble Tolkien onto the shelf.

Another change in tone downstairs. Unlike last night, when the roars and gasps meant they were fucking and I had to stuff the pillow over my ears and hum to avoid hearing the bewildering cocophany, tonight is another beating. I want to stuff the pillow over my ears again, but I need to hear if the adults are getting closer. There is shouting on both sides. Why are you shouting back when you usually just stand there? It only lasts a couple of minutes, mum becoming quieter as it progresses. I hear him puff and blow for a few moments more. Seemingly spent, there are no further sounds from either of them through the last mournful notes of Jungleland. When it finishes, there is no discernible sound from the living room, and a new record does not go onto the turntable, even at a muted volume.

In the silence, I feel the need to pee and check on my little brothers. What if you're awake and scared and need comfort? I'd need to pee if I get up. There is no Springsteen to cover my footsteps to their room, and there would be hell to pay for rousing him just now we're probably safe. I haven't forgotten the day I woke him for his nightshift at 5.59 when it was supposed to be 6pm. For a while I lie without moving, trying to ignore the insistence of my bladder – *go to sleep go to sleep* – closing my eyes in the hope that blacking out the world will drop me into ignorant sleep.

I hear a quiet creep upstairs then the faintest movements of the boys' door on the carpet. A few seconds later, like when the sun comes out from behind a cloud on a summer's day, the light on my face increases in brightness. I hear a barely sibilant "Sh" and dare to crack my eyes open. It's mum, and her features are arranged as they should be on her face. Mum closes the door over, leaving a sliver of a gap. There mustn't be a click. She speaks in the whisper that doesn't travel, "He should sleep 'til the morning. I'm going to sleep under your bed. Give

"Margaret!" comes the shout from downstairs. I hear him stagger from the sitting room to check the kitchen and their bedroom. I look at mum who has become frozen. "MARGARET!" He starts climbing the stairs, grunts when his shoulder thumps into the wall. Shit, the boys will be awake now. Mum steps to the side. There is a narrow space between the wall and the back of the door that we use to play hide and seek on rainy days. She puts her index finger to her mouth in a silent "Sh." His feet are scuffing along the hall carpet. He roars again, his voice getting much louder as he turns the corner of the hall.

Suddenly there is a flash of light in my eyes and he is there, his left hand holding the door handle, which keeps the door from pushing into mum's slender frame. His right is grasping the door frame for support. His shirt has rucked up so it's not all tucked into his belted jeans. There are large sweat patches under his arms. His furrowed brow hoods over his dark brown eyes, and his sparse auburn hair is spiking up on one side. With the orange light behind him, and the red mist in eyes, he demands

“Where is she?” I am pinned between two pairs of eyes that are commanding me to act in opposite ways. I face straight into the eyes of monster, not permitted to petrify to stone.

I force a breath in, drag my tongue from the roof of my mouth and find a voice that is appropriately scared but clear as a bell, “I heard the front door open and close. That’s what woke me up.”

“What?” he thunders. The red mist flickers but his ragged breathing still holds the threat of another eruption.

“I think she went out the front door. I think that’s what woke me up.”

He sways a little as though the alcohol is beginning to pull him under again. He moves his left hand from the door handle to the frame. I keep my eyes fixed on his, but mum’s face is at the edge of my vision.

“Stupid fuckin cow!” he growls. He pushes himself back from the door. His upper body falls back against the airing cupboard door then his feet belatedly catching up in a shuffling step.

“Really?” A slur is creeping into his mouth.

Unwilling to trust my voice a third time, I nod with tiny little movements that do not unlock my wide blue eyes from his. The slightest flicker would be enough.

Turning to face the loo, he propels himself forward. His hand thuds on the wall, saving his face from the china. I keep my eyes fixed on the point where the monster’s eyes were, I could still betray that all is not as I just made it to be. He takes an age to unbuckle his trousers and have a pee. Coming out the toilet his trousers aren’t done up. He looks towards me again, but his eyes cannot focus enough to lock onto mine.

He shambles away down the hall, muttering curses. My eyes follow him. As he turns the corner, my gaze stops on the yellowing paint of the boys’ door. He almost stumbles down the stairs as his sweat soaked shirt scrapes over the blown vinyl on the walls. 7 stairs down, round the half landing, 6 stairs down then into his bedroom. The door slams shut.

I really need to pee and to break the tension in my body. I will my body to stone while my thoughts are inside two other bedrooms; praying that the inhabitants are falling into a deep sleep. I dare not go to check my brothers. Their bedroom is above his and there is a loose floorboard between their beds. My heart slows and saliva returns to my mouth.

Eventually mum pushes the door over, breaking my gaze. I do not move my eyes towards hers.

Noiselessly, mum gets down on the floor and slides herself under the bed. It will smell of the hessian cover hanging slackly from the edges of the base. Mum tucks herself close to the wall. I move my cold arms under the covers, folds them over my chest to keep my thoughts buried behind my breastbone. The choking lump moves away from my throat. As I swallow, the sound is too loud in my ears. I allow myself a slightly deeper breath.

Just when I'm beginning to settle towards sleep, mum whispers, "Pass me down a blanket, it's cold under here." I give mum the second one down, smoothing the crocheted throw flat as I go. It is these little details that count in a house with a monster. Mum ends the night with "He'll have forgotten by morning. Get yourself some sleep."