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Night

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Night

Abstract

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Night

He pulled his feet up, drew his body into a curl. And the bottoms of his sneakers rubbed dirt on the sheets.

Night had inked him into one of its corners; back to the wall; not a lot of choices left now.

‘So what ya waitin’ for?’ he asked himself.

‘For the dog,’ he answered. ‘If the dog yelps, I’ll go.’

His arms inside their jacket sleeves prickled. Something about sleeping with so many clothes on made the hairs on his arms ache, like they were all being pushed the wrong way.

He’d slept in his clothes before.

‘I don’t know how you get your sheets so dirty. You must never wash your feet.’

‘Footie practise, Mum.’

She believed anything.

‘You don’t have to wait for the dog, you know.’ Yes he did. The ridiculous smiling aeroplanes on his bedroom curtains told him, ‘You’re just a kid.’ It was too big a step for him to take on his own.

Anyway the pact was already made, in the back of his English book, fifty times over, in neat lines, down the page:

‘If the dog yelps, I’ll go.

If the dog yelps, I’ll go.

If the dog yelps, I’ll go.’

So the decision wasn’t his anymore, it was the dog’s.

‘So don’t fall asleep.’

‘No!’

He needed the warning. Time was moving fast, changing everything, including him.

‘And don’t chicken out!’

He wasn’t ‘chicken’. He knew that. If he was, he’d have gone long ago.

He let his eyes make inroads between the stars. He’d never been afraid

of the dark. Imaginary elephants in his room had never been a problem. His quota of fear had already been filled.

Night gleamed glossy black against his window pane and nibbled the curtains. He waited.

The folded edge of the blanket scratched his chin, like an old man with whiskers. He craned his neck to be free of its touch. Pushing the blanket off would have been the easier solution, but the 'easy way' didn't always present itself. And when it did, it wasn't always as easy as it looked. It was night; pushing the blanket off meant being cold, and the blanket, for all its prickles, was warm.

He'd asked for a new blanket once, a long time ago, or at least to have the old one washed in 'Softly', but he'd learned to put up with it, now. Almost.

'One more night and you won't even notice it,' he told himself.

That's what worried him most.

He repeated his pact with himself, 'If the dog yelps, I'll go!'

Bed grew warmer; he kept his body curled tight and listened to the 'night' noises.

Voices from the television in the lounge room sounded like vain attempts at communication from outer space.

'You're such a dear.'

'Why are you so good to me?'

'I love you.'

'I love you too.'

Hugs.

Laughs.

A saxophone played.

It was too late for family comedies; she must have videoed them.

'You look so funny. Where DID you get that outfit?'

'I thought you'd like it.'

'Put it this way ... I like YOU.'

Insert the laughter.

Sometimes you could almost believe it was true; that Superman could fly; that Dr Who could catch the down-town time warp in a telephone box. That people really sat around their kitchen tables, saying things like, '...I love you.'

It was all a hoax, of course. There were wires in the back of the set that made it beep and whir. But television hadn't been invented when his mother was a girl, so she hadn't learnt not to believe it.

Her lounge chair creaked as she rose. She was about to make herself a cup of tea. He knew the 'night' noises by heart, the catalogue entire. The

video clicking to 'hold', her slippers wearing away the carpet as she walked, the carpet wearing away her slippers. The jug boiling, the tea bag hitting the bottom of the pedal bin, Thwump! all alone without even a biscuit packet wrapper to keep it company.

She emptied the pedal bin every evening, full or empty. Got rid of the day before; dispatched it from memory; pretended it hadn't happened; started again; turned on the telly; made the tea.

Formula living. Addicted to ritual, addicted to tea, addicted to comedies — her painkillers.

'You're such a dear.'

'You make me so happy.'

'Why are you so good to me?'

'I love you.'

'I love you too.'

The audience, paid to laugh, earned its due.

So much to leave behind: his Mum, his paper run, his prickly blanket. And he was just a kid. His breath shivered out over his lips as he thought about staying; thought about going. He pressed his hands between his knees and let the blanket rub his face to see if he could take it.

As you grew numb to the big things, you felt the little things more. He wondered why.

'Ya have to feel SOMETHIN', don't ya?

His Mum didn't. He'd never heard her laugh; never heard her cry. Often he'd seen her hit the floor with the Whump! of a rag doll. Seen her bleed just a little, just a few times. But always she'd be there in the same chair the next time it happened, the next time the dog yelped.

She took Lotto coupons; played the numbers game. Some times you win, some times you lose.

Most nights she got a 'Hello'. Some nights she got a kiss, some nights she even got danced around the kitchen table and taken out for a Chinese meal.

Some nights the dog got a pat and a: 'Hey, old fellar, waitin' up for your old mate, are ya. 'Att'a good boy. 'Att'a good fella'.'

That was most nights: the 'some' nights. But there were 'other' nights.

The boy lay motionless in his bed, eyes on the darkness, ears pricked to the silence of the front gate, waiting to see what kind of a night it would be, a 'some' night, or an 'other' night? The dog was always the first to know.

He was under the floor boards now, lying awake, in his bed of newspapers. Always there, just like Mum, always in her chair.

'If they can take it, why can't you?'

Sometimes he thought it took more courage to stay than to go? The 'other' nights didn't happen all that often.

'One out of ... how many?'

'Who keeps count?'

He ran his fingers along the top of his bedhead and felt the notches there.

'Should have used gate-post tallying, easier to count.' There were so many now, his fingertips ran the tracks of them, stumbling at odd intervals on deeper cuts.

He drew his hand back and chewed his thumb nail. That's what he made the marks with, his nail.

It was getting late. Good sign? Bad sign?

'Looking for signs now?'

He would fall asleep soon, if he had to wait too long. He was just a kid. And the television was making the whole house dull.

'Where DID you get that outfit?'

'I thought you'd like it.'

'Put it this way...'

They said things like that to each other sometimes. He could recall a few instances, so it wasn't all that alien.

'Don't chicken out now. You promised, if the dog yelps...'

'Sometimes it takes more courage to stay than to go.' Or was it, 'more courage to GO...'? He didn't know; he was just a kid.

'I don't know how you get your sheets so dirty.'

Her chair creaked; she was making more tea. It was starting to sound like one of those 'some' nights, which meant it wasn't going to happen and he was kind of pleased. Pleased for his Mum and pleased for the dog. And pleased for himself, sort of, that the 'choosing' was almost over.

He couldn't keep sleeping in his clothes, they were gunna pong.

And there were plenty of those 'some' nights, and that made the 'other' nights not so bad.

'Yeah, um ... it's just that...'

He spoke into his pillow and his own warm breath washed back on him. 'It's just that...'

When you didn't know which night it was going to be, that was as good as it being every night. Why couldn't it be just Fridays? Every Friday'd be great. Then he'd have the rest of the week to himself when he didn't have to be scared.

His mother burped in the lounge room. She was never scared. Never cried, never hurt, never laughed.

He wasn't like his Mum, he laughed when he was happy, cried when

he was hurt. That is, he used to. He hadn't cried the last time; or the time before.

'Don't you hit him!'

'It doesn't matter, Mum. It doesn't matter.'

Brave words, stupid words, but they were starting to ring true. The hits didn't matter so much any more, but the waiting...

He hated the waiting. And sometimes the waiting got so bad he couldn't wait any more.

'Hit me. Go on, hit me!'

'Don't you hit him!'

'If you want'a help me, Mum, leave! We'll go together.'

'Your father loves you. He loves us both.'

A nice bloke, till he gets a beer in him.

The dog rustled out from under the house and the boy lifted his head. The gate was about to creak. He knew it. She knew it. The television went off, the grey light disappeared, the night fell suddenly black and white. It had happened so quickly. His eyes were wide, letting night pour in.

He waited for the yelp, for the kicking, for his sign.

'I'm not the dog! I'm not the dog!' He couldn't live from pat to pat. 'I'm not my Mum! I'm not my Mum!' He couldn't live from kiss to kiss. He hated Chinese food, he didn't drink tea, and television didn't take his pain away.

The gate scraped its metal bottom on the path and the dog ran to meet its master.

He held his breath. Night wasn't the whole of his life, but it was beginning to feel that way.

'Att'a boy! Waitin' up for your old mate, are ya. 'Att'a boy. 'Att'a good dog.'

A tear moistened the boy's pillow; he hadn't cried for ages. The dog had let him down.

The telly came back on. Footsteps shuffled down the side of the house, heavy with frozen chooks won at the pub? Heavy with something. He knew the sounds so well, he'd been listening for so long. The dog settled back into its bed beneath the floorboards.

'I'm not the dog! I'm not the dog! I'm not the dog!'

No more tears came. Had he waited too long and grown up at precisely the wrong moment?

'Waitin' up for me, Elsie love? Where's the kid?'

'Gone to bed.'

'I got something for him.'

'Leave him be. He's got school tomorrow.'

'Nah, I got something for him and I want 'a give it to him now, 'cos he's a good kid, that kid of mine. He understands his old man, don't ya, tiger? Look what I got for ya.'

'Elsie?'

'What?'

'Where's he gone, Elsie?'

'What?'

Night gaped at the window; the curtains waved goodbye.

Graham Mort

STEPS

The boy is walking
Out of the future,
Clutching the chair arm
Under his arm
Like a teddy bear.
It pulled clean off.
It bewilders him.
His grandmother may be angry:
He does not know.

The man lying in the road
Under his crashed motorbike,
The old woman pegging out
A clean sheet are dazzled
By the same sun;
The light sets off like a sprinter.