

I Don't Want To Know

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I remember that I am eleven and eleven needs to be worked at, it has a lot more living-up-to and acting-your-age than ten. I'm eleven and in bed, safe in bed with the blanket I don't need, with the scratchy blanket I don't need that folds over my neck like sticking down an envelope, an airmail envelope with the blue and red squares that get posted aneverywhere, posted off to aneverywhere with news and adventure inside. This is my sleep-game, my comfort-game. I play with words, make them feel at home in my head, rock them with the rhythm of my prayers. I still go to Sunday School. I'm the only one who knew how to spell *Nebuchadnezzar*. I've made by bed prayers into long shopping lists. We have such a big all-over-the-place family, so I give them all, in order, which I change every night, *God blesses* and *take care ofs* and *look afters*. I'm scared I'll leave someone off and they'll have a car accident or something.

But the words will not stay still. I'm cheating because I don't believe them anymore, even if I make them real and say them, like this, out loud into my hand

I'm eleven safe in bed

but there's a man under the house. This is not Brisbane Australia, this is Mt Hagen Papua New Guinea and this is not a nightmare and I am not a child. There really truly is a man under the house and I try each night here in my head to write out a memory, to write a memory out, out of my life, but he's still there. I can hear him, the way he stumbles hard into things and up against my floor which is his ceiling. Tonight he's drunk-angry. He's always drunk but sometimes he gets real mad and thumps the house-stumps and if I put my hand on the wall I can feel it shivering. First time he did it, one night about three months ago, my father went downstairs to check on him, see if he was alright, and found him punching the stumps and head-butting them, blood and vomit everywhere. He left him there, came back up silent-angry. I heard them talking so I wouldn't hear, voices soft as the rain outside. Later Mummy went down to clean him up. I think she snuck out. I've taught myself not to say *Mummy* outside. Words turn into mousetraps if you're not careful, specially names.

We don't know his name. No-one said anything but I know, soon after we moved in, we all agreed not to talk about him or notice him. He was just there, and we lived with him. Well, over him. I only ever see him coming or going. I don't know where he goes, but he comes back with his brains blown out on betel-nut and mustard and cheaper-by-the-carton (the bottle shop says: it's on a sign in Motu and Pidgin) South Pacific beer. My father worries about where he gets the money. He should. Mummy gives it to him, or some of it anyway.

I haven't seen her do it but I know she does.

He goes in the mornings after I leave for school. I can see him way down the dark wet back part of the house where the ground slopes up to meet the floor, scrunched up asleep with his head on the chicken-wire coop we made for our pushbikes. He comes back at night looking as if he's just killed someone, or about to. We have a pit-pit fence, like bamboo only thinner and sharper. Every time he comes back, he doesn't use the gate, he rips out or breaks off some pit-pit. He cuts his hands and I've seen him with bits of fingers hanging off but he still does it. And every weekend my father mends the hole in the fence back up again. He acts like the house is his.

Sometimes he goes and doesn't come back for days and days till we all secretly hope he's gone for good. The man under the house that is, not my father. But he always comes back and when he does he's got worse, you can read it on his face. He has this face. It's all the missionary-casserole stuff they tried to frighten me with back home in Brisbane. He's got these really big clean-laundry white eyes with huuuuge black pupils like hand grenades in the middle of this wide squished-up black face and his nose is squashed and broken in two places so it wobbles without moving and he's old so he's got cracks and lines rearranging everything, especially round his mouth which opens up like an ulcer with these snapped-off teeth, about six or seven, stained all brown and yellow down at the points and red up near the gums from the betel. Behind my prayers at night, behind every black smile I meet, I see this face. He smiles at me sometimes but doesn't mean it. I know he hates me. A smile's worse than spitting at me or ignoring me and he knows it and he knows I know. I want to hurt him. If I wasn't eleven going on ten and scared of him, I would.

I make myself go back to my sleep-game. I'm in bed, safe in bed with the rain outside, the rain outside that means Wet Season, the Wet Season when the sky opens up and God pisses down on us for weeks and weeks non-stop, non-stop storms even Mrs Noah wouldn't send her kids out to school in, out to school in that clapped-out old bus with the snobby kids and the sharp-elbowed kids and the sing-song words-will-always-hurt-me kids and the work-friends-of-my-father's kids.

He's gone away again, to Kainantu this time, my father. He was supposed to be here for my school fair next Saturday. I know he knows I'm scared of the man under the house, but he never says anything, not really, just looks out at me from safe inside the four-wheel drive, on his way to anyeverywhere again, and reminds me I'm the Man of the House while he's away. He makes me want to puke.

The man from under the house comes back, he's in my head without permission again. I day-dream him dead, three ways dead. I have him drink and drink till his blood runs beer. I have him crossing the busy road out front,

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dumber than a preschooler, not looking both ways, and getting flattened splatt by a whopping great big lorry. I have him going home to his village and sponging off wantoks and relatives till he's used up all their patience and they throw him out into the rain and he catches cold and gets pneumonia and shakes and coughs himself to death. I'm not racist, I know I'm not. He'd kill me if he could. Look at his eyes, it's true. I'm just getting in first. I don't care that he's black, except sometimes I can't see him properly at night so I have to listen like I'm blind, put my ear to the floor. He can be as black as he likes, just not under my bed. Besides, you can't talk about it, the words won't let you. Grown-ups always get it wrong. People from my father's work, and all their naggy missuses, they come round and complain about these people. They talk about them like they're just rats or cockroaches or something in this nice clean house called PNG. And my father, he stands up for them, the way they live and think and everything, but that's wrong too. He does it all the time. Moses, one of my father's labourers, when he came round for coffee all nervous and scrubbed, he got the full treatment

*bloody expats
half-arsed bureaucrats
dime a dozen back home
turn into tinpot dictators
treat you people like shit*

and Moses shuffled and faked a smile, sort of collapsed in on himself. You couldn't see it but you knew, so why couldn't my stupid father? I had to stop him. I did something brave and really really dumb. I'm only eleven: I knew I could get away with it. I put my arm up next to Moses's and said that if we cut ourselves we all bleed the same colour and that's all there was to it so they all turned to me shocked and laughed and realised and shut up about it. My father told that story to every white person who came into our house after that. I couldn't tell him not to or why, and I couldn't tell him where I'd stolen the words from. I just died a bit and hated him for a while, till he went away on work. Again.

Back to my sleep-game. I'm in bed, safe in bed with the floods outside, the floods outside that'll fill up the tank for sure this time, that'll overflow the tank and slosh down on the ground, slosh down and make rivers and streams, streams and lakes and billabongs of clear water, clear fresh rainwater billabongs with capsized beetles and drowned bugs in them, drowned things and live wriggles like mosquito larvae (malaria! malaria!) who are the enemy.

I wear my cardigan all the time in the cold soggy Wet Season because it soaks up the rain and when you take it off for class suddenly you feel dry again. Billy and Philip say jumper but they mean cardigan. Mine's grey and red, stripes, like a zebra with sunburn. Mummy made it for me but I always say *My*

mother made it for me: she's very clever with her hands. One of our spare Aunts we don't mention anymore once said that. Partly it's a lie, this time. She made it on the knitting machine she had specially sent from Australia. It looks like a Lost In Space ironing board and lives in the spare room. It has *spools* and *arms* and a *threader* thingy which is a long wire as tall as my father with an eye at the end the wool goes through. But mostly it has millions and millions of mean-looking thin wires packed in together with bumps and hooks on them, and a *shuttle* with a handle on it. It has whole words of its own. Mummy said it reminded her of when she was teaching at the Melbourne School for the Blind years and years ago and they made books out of braille. She sits and runs the shuttle back and forth, back and forth, finding and keeping a rhythm, stops, fiddles with the hooks and starts again. It makes an out-in-the-street sound like a go-cart wheel on glass on bitumen but she likes it. I know why. No-one ever thinks I know these things but I do. It's home. It's Australia and our old house and it makes her calm and soft.

Back to the night-game because I've GOT to get to sleep. I'm in bed, safe in bed with everything else outside, everything outside being gently rained into sleep, settled into sleep with—

Someone's shaking my bed. Someone's down the end of my bed jerking it all over the place. No, how dumb can you get, there's no-one there. But I'm still shaking, the bed's shaking, the wall's shuddering against my hand. It's him again. He's bashing the stumps and but when I get up out of bed, the whole house is shaking. My light's swinging round and round on its wire leash. Books are slipping from the shelves. I'm lurching now, I'm trying to stand still but I'm lurching anyway like I'm drunk. The trees are swishing and the street lamps out on the road are swaying and that's when I realise it's a tremor, a baby earthquake.

I know the house, I've mapped it in my head lying awake here so even in the dark and even though the floor's tossing sea-sick it takes about three seconds before I'm in my parents' room and run smack straight into Mummy who's running to get me. We end up in the hallway making anchors of each other. But I know what to do. We've had drills for this in school. We get down on all fours and crawl quickly to the kitchen, which has a door out to the backyard and a table we hide under. Plates fall, glasses shatter, cupboards flap open, drawers slide out and crash next to us on the floor, exploding knives and forks and stuff. The lino's buckling under our knees but we just stay still, in control, hug each other like we're all we have and all we care about and arms can protect you from anything.

And then it stops, just like that.

I can hear the rain, with sirens in it, phones in the distance, people calling to each other and the thwack-slop of the water tank still rocking and spilling

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like the world's still heaving. We sit unable to move, huddled under the table till things get quiet again. Then the silence breaks open. There's someone pounding on the kitchen door hard and desperate. Mummy looks at me, lets me go. I'm eleven and I'm not safe in bed but I go to the door and open it and it's him. He's not human anymore, his face is mashed. His eyes are ready to go off.

He says something to me at me in Pidgin English. It's too fast, he's vomiting words on me.

I don't want to know.

I shut the door on him.