

THE QUARRY

Kate Dawson

The Nightlight

Gail watched as the house across the road continued to burn. She saw others gathered outside pointing and staring, children crying and that mutt from next door yelping. There was a body only metres from the house, lying face down in the grass. It looked like a man. He was wearing pyjamas. Her fingertips turned white as she squeezed the rail of the balcony. The flames were eating away at that weatherboard house. She didn't know her neighbour very well but had seen him in passing. An odd fellow with glasses, who was always fidgeting or rushing somewhere. And there were always dark circles under his eyes. She should probably call that woman, Joan. The one who had come around one afternoon bearing lemon slice and wishing to speak about Gail's

new neighbour. The one who had been worried about her son; she had begged Gail to watch out for him. The distant sound of sirens grew closer as a fire truck sped down their little street. The firemen ran as fast as they could in their huge boots.

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Matt was supposed to outgrow his nightlight, but it hadn't gone to Vinnies with his old clothes. Neither had it been stuffed away in a drawer. While it was plugged into the wall, it ensured his safety from the horrors outside. The orange glow from beside his bed encouraged books, shoes and an outdated computer to come to life; they were shadows on the wall. An open notebook lay on the desk, with envelopes of mail beside it. Some were torn open, while some remained sealed. The light let the room be filled with a warmth, rather than a presence. But there was a rustling and Matt's eyes snapped open.

Something was outside.

It's just a possum, he thought and closed his eyes again. But another noise scraped the side of the house, as if a tree branch had decided it would grow a fingernail. His eyes sprung open once more and he creased his brow. There it was again. *It's just an animal. It is not a person standing outside the window.* Matt tried to pull the curtains shut tighter, not willing to invite the darkness in. He tossed over to the other side and pulled the blanket back over him. The night continued to age and soon Matt was asleep.

Outside the wind grew and the trees shook, dancing to show off their moves and rid themselves of extra weight. Blades of grass moved as one. The limbs of trees relocated to new places, some finding refuge on the corrugated iron roof. The roof, however, would not accept these visitors silently.

The orange snapped into blackness, shadows became invisible. Matt sprang up, wheezing for air. He went to grab his glasses from the bedside table and felt his hand knock them. There was the unmistakable sound of plastic skating across wood and hitting the wall.

Damn it.

The glasses were trapped behind the bedside table.

‘No...no...no.’

Light was his priority. Matt tried to switch his nightlight back on - nothing.

He shouted for his parents.

Matt rolled to the floor from his bed and began to crawl, shivering though his body was covered in sweat. His fingers gripped at the thick carpet, afraid of what lay ahead. The smell of satay noodles drifted through the air from the takeaway Matt had ordered earlier. Dinner seemed so long ago.

‘Mum, Dad,’ he whispered, but the response – nothing.

Hand after hand he crept ahead, searching for the doorframe. When his hand found it he reached up along the wood, clutching the wall for support as he grasped for that switch. Hopefully it was only the nightlight that was broken, but the switch clicked without gifting any light. He slumped back to the floor, still shaking. *Where are my parents? Are they even alive? Are they tied up?* He could hear his heart pounding in his chest and his breath was loud and quick. He brought his knees in close and held them tight, trying to stay still and silent so no one would know he was there. His eyes weren’t adjusting to the night. Without his glasses, they couldn’t.

My parents don’t live here.

He realised he had been calling out to strangers or to no one. *So they might still be alive.*

In the kitchen, there would be a torch, but that was miles away. And with the wind still speaking, who knew what was out there? How could he go out unarmed? But if he didn’t risk it, he would not make it through the night. The rustling sound came again and then that fingernail scraping. He covered his ears and sunk into the carpet.

‘Stop, stop, stop,’ he whispered, begging as he clutched at his ears, shaking on the floor. The sound eventually faded. Matt carefully lifted his hands from his ears, hoping whatever it was couldn’t see him.

He had to get to the light, which meant getting to the kitchen. If he crawled, then he wouldn’t knock himself out by bumping into anything. *It will be safer.* He

placed his hands back on the carpet, reached ahead to make sure it was clear, and began to crawl. The wind had started outside again. Or was it rain? It was difficult to tell. It had a voice that screeched and howled like a banshee.

Matt felt like he'd been crawling forever. Reaching his foot back, he hoped for it to reach nothing but carpet. It touched the doorframe.

'Shit.'

Trying not to be discouraged, he continued forward.

He tried to slow his breathing. 'Just take a deep breath and focus,' is what a psychologist would have said, had he ever been brave enough to go. But the hypnotherapist his mother had sent him to as a child hadn't helped.

An animal cry pierced the darkness. Matt covered his mouth to stifle the scream he felt rising in his throat. *Is that thing in here?*

Then it happened again.

What is that?

Again.

A dog. Relax, probably belongs to the neighbours to complement their irritating kids.

Matt's hand touched something sticky. He shuddered and tried to ignore the germs that must be writhing within the fibres of the carpet. Wiping his hand on the carpet to remove the stickiness, he bumped the leather couch to his left. He needed to change direction soon. Only now did he realise the painful irony that he hadn't bought those sensor lights. The ones he had been looking at in Bunnings only a few days before. They were so magical. You walked past them and suddenly – light! That beautiful thing that allowed us to see and gave us warmth. *Curse you sun for not being out all day and night. Forget the other side of the world! We need it more. I need it more.*

His face knocked into a wooden chair. His eyes tried to make out the shapes in front of him, but they didn't look familiar. He'd forgotten where things were placed in the house. His eyes squinted as he looked ahead at the distortions in front of him, which were fuzzy around the edges. They could be pieces of furniture, or just as easily

a ghost or creature. These shapes reminded him of an earlier time when he didn't wear glasses, when everything was blurry or seen in double. As a child he'd felt like his friends had evil twins. He had a sharp sense of hearing, but his sight had always been both terrible and frightening.

Matt moved ahead, weaving around objects through the carpet, dirt and hair.

His own hair covered the tips of his ears and his mum had always disliked it. She would complain it was too long and nag him to get it cut. His fingernails were ripped short; he hadn't been able to kick the habit of tearing the tips when they grew to a reasonable length. The flannel pyjama pants hid his lean body from the world. And that was the way he liked it, never wearing shorts that would expose his pale chicken legs.

A cold, smooth sensation ran under his hand, interrupting his train of thought. He pulled it away instinctively as if he were trying to avoid a burn from a pot. But he had to continue on, so he reluctantly placed his hand back on the surface, trying to decipher this new texture.

Lino. *Could it be?*

The kitchen.

Relieved, he wiggled forward and placed his other hand to accept the cold and felt his knees hard against the floor. The usual humming of the fridge was silent, as if it had lost its voice. The silence was not his friend. He reached to the left letting his hand find the kitchen drawers. He felt the edges and figured out which one was the third drawer, 'the miscellaneous drawer' he had called it when he first moved in. He now regretted making that secret hideaway of random junk which had no place. He searched the drawer for that keyring-torch-thing his Mum had given him last Christmas. He had thanked her, knowing she was just trying to help. She had always been worried and had hoped he would grow out of it. But when he didn't, when the fear followed him, she had felt helpless. The keyring was a gift meant as kindness, but really it just drew attention to everything, to the darkness, to his inability to sleep through the night. To the fact he had fallen short of being a man.

He didn't want to look at the torch and be reminded of what it represented, as it dangled next to his keys.

No.

So he'd hidden it, and now was sifting through the drawer for it. But in amongst everything else, he could not find it. His hands fumbled through the drawer, passing over pegs, Blu-tack, batteries, an emergency pack of cigarettes. Then his hand came across a small box with a rough edge. A nervous but excited laugh escaped his lips and hung in the darkness. He shook the box and heard the small pieces of wood hit the sides. He attempted to light a match, but it didn't take. His hands were shaking as he tried another. Light spread in front of him as a flame was born. An unsteady glow of light allowed the shadows to dance and sway. Matt exhaled in relief and continued rummaging through the junk searching for the torch. The flame of the match bounced around, providing little light to assist.

Then there was a sound at his feet. Matt stopped and looked around trying to figure out what made the scuttling sound. Something hairy ran across his foot. Gasping, Matt jumped backwards trying to escape what he hoped he had imagined. He could not shake the feeling of that thing. He felt it all over him. His shoulders hunched and his hands curled into fists. Then he noticed light in the corner of his eye. Matt turned towards it, towards the fire that was spreading across the carpet. The hand that held the match was empty. His eyes widened as he stepped back. The fire was growing, fast. He had to do something.

He yanked the tablecloth from the dining table, sending the fruit bowl spinning and a mug crashing to the floor. He threw the tablecloth over the fire hoping it would smother it, that the fire would surrender. For a second it worked. But then the edge of the tablecloth began to burn and smoke seeped out as the fire began to consume the fabric. Matt leapt backwards and pulled his pyjama top over his mouth, trying to avoid the harsh smoke filling his lungs. This smoke wasn't comforting like a cigarette. This smoke was evil; it wanted to swallow you. It stung Matt's eyes. He had to get out of there.

Dropping to his hands and knees, Matt headed for the door. It was becoming even more of a challenge to breathe and the fire was bright. Sweat dripped from his skin. When he hit the door he scrambled to open it, thumping and banging, trying to escape. When he found the handle he screamed as he touched it, withdrawing his stinging hand. He used his shirt to cover his hand, and turning the handle he finally

rolled out into the darkness and onto the grass. The darkness brought a cool freeing air to his lungs. He felt the grass on his cheek and rolled over to get more air, his hand throbbing and his face and eyes wet. Outside suddenly felt so safe.

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There were shouts from the road and a child crying. Neighbours had gathered outside and the sound of sirens were loud. A middle aged lady appeared in front of him asking if he was okay, waving a blurry hand to see if he could understand her. He tried to answer but his energy had left him. Attempting a nod was the only response he could return. At the sound of footsteps he turned to see firefighters run past in black and yellow, helmets and masks covering their faces. The lady told him she would call his mother and rushed to get him some water. The glow from the house softened as the firefighters shouted commands to each other.

The nightlight hadn't survived. It would be nothing more than a piece of melted plastic within his empty home. Tomorrow he would face the night again and he would face it alone.