

THE QUARRY

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The Great Roaring Noise

This is sort of a kid's story. Not that I believe in kid's stories... I am currently expanding it into a novella, which is turning out to be rather macabre, so perhaps it's more of a nightmare than a story. However, this is the short story where it all began....

‘But what was it like Da?’ whispered Seamus in the gloom. ‘Tell us about the Great Roaring Noise.’

Da chuckled, ‘I keep forgetting that you kids are all too young to have heard the Great Roaring Noise.’

Nine little sets of eyes blinked in the dark, eagerly waiting for him to go on. It was one of their favourite games to pass the time. They would give him no peace now, badgering and pestering him, until at last he would sigh, and then in his slow and dreamy voice, begin to talk of the life that had been before.

Before the Dark.

‘Go on Da,’ Seamus pleaded, his tiny high voice penetrating the silence, ‘Tell us what was it like.’

‘Keep your voice down,’ hissed Da, ‘or you’ll wake him, and then you’ll have nothing to worry about except which one of you he’s going to eat for lunch.’

They all froze, hardly daring to breathe, hoping that he wouldn’t hear them. He was over there in the other corner, nestled amongst the trash. Occasionally, in the

soft dusty dark, they might hear an antenna twitch, but Old Man Cockroach had barely moved since he ate their brother, Blod, yesterday.

After a long while, the one they called Ten, simply because he was the last one of them born, and Da had run out of names after the first nine, grabbed Da by the leg.

‘Please Da.’

Da sighed and settled back into the dust. With his front legs he slowly cleaned the dust off his palps before beginning in a slow whisper, ‘Well, you couldn’t really call it a noise...’

‘What do you mean,’ whispered Buck into the frightened hush, his outsized fang that gave him his name, glinting in the gloom.

‘Well, it’s not like the sort of noise you might hear. Like when Old Man Cockroach gets hungry and comes looking for us, or even a scream like Blod made when he was being eaten,’ and here, Da’s voice fell away.

None of them would ever forget the terror of that moment, as Blod was swallowed, piece by awful piece.

‘No, it’s more like the sort of noise that you feel first. And it’s only later, when it’s all over, and you realise you’re still alive, that you might think about what it sounded like. It’s like, I don’t know, like...like the sound that the walls might make if they fell down, like the sound you might hear inside your head if it was being crushed by the jaws of a cockroach.’

Ten whimpered with fright when Da said this, but Da didn’t seem to notice, he was in the grip of a powerful memory.

‘It was like the sound of a thousand spiders screaming as they’re being boiled in hot water. Except it wasn’t the *sound* I heard first, but the wind.’ Da paused for effect. ‘It was the wind that really frightened me. I had never seen a wind like that before. I remember that day so clearly. I was in my corner working the web early. We’d had a good harvest the night before, with the flying ants just throwing themselves at us. Our webs were groaning with food. I was so stuffed! Couldn’t have possibly eaten another one. I’d been up most of the night, wrapping and storing the harvest for a rainy day, but still I woke up early before all the others, to repair the tears, to check the tension. Our family have always been like that. We’ve worked that corner for generations.’

You have to understand that in the old days, on the Outside, you didn’t have Old Man Cockroach to worry about. They stayed down there on the floor where they

belonged, and we had the skies. Things had an order then. We all had our place, not like now, not like this topsy-turvy time.'

Da was on a roll now, his voice soft with longing. This was what the children loved. Tales of the old world – when a spider wasn't too scared to move, lest he be eaten.

'And the light,' Da went on, 'Oh the light, it was so bright, like nothing you ever get here. With light like that, you could see the flying things clear across the room. You could set your web up just right, catch 'em on the updraft. No spider ever went hungry in those days.'

'No hunger!' squeaked Pip. Not one of them could remember a day when they had not been hungry.

'So anyways, when this wind started up, I did what we'd always done. I called the alarm to tell all my brothers that something was up. I grabbed the web just like you're supposed to, and shook it with all my might, so they could all see, so they could run and take cover, and to frighten whatever it was, to warn it off, but it wasn't frightened at all. It just kept coming, up the edge of the roof, and heading straight for me.'

'What'd it look like?' whispered Ten, in the faintest of voices.

'It was huge, like some silver beam of light, and on the end is this black mouth as wide as five spiders, and that's where the terrible great roaring noise is coming from. And it's hungry, like nothing I've ever seen before. Not even like Old Man Cockroach over there,' said Da, gesturing with his head towards the other corner. 'He just comes over 'cause he's a little bit hungry and fancies a bit of young spider for afternoon tea. This thing was different. It was insatiable. It sucked up everything in sight. Whole webs, whole families that had worked the north roof for countless generations, back to the dawn of time, gone in the shake of a leg. It was terrible,' Da shook his head, lost in grief. After a long moment, he raised his great shiny head, his eight eyes glinting in the dark. 'Now, where was I?'

'The Great Roaring Noise,' they all said together.

'Ah yes, The Great Roaring Noise. Well, it came straight for me. I see the edge of the web start to lift off the wall, and I run. Just in time too. I just made it back to the corner, as the whole web was sucked straight off the wall. All the ants I had so carefully wrapped and hung from the roof for a midnight snack – gone. My three brothers who were working the west wing – gone. Your grandfather, your

grandmother, my sister, all gone. But still, the beast wants more, and the faster I run, the faster it follows me. It's then that I realise, that it's after *me*. Every time I duck and dive it changes direction. And it's gaining on me. I can feel it's cold breath on the back of my neck. Finally, I make a desperate dive for the Crack.

'The Crack,' breathed Max.

'Tell us about the Crack,' continued Jax, finishing Max's sentences as he always did.

'My family,' said Da, before pausing to correct himself, 'your family, have used the Crack for hundreds of lives. It had never failed us before. I just make it inside the Crack, before it gets to me, and that terrible noise passes over the top of me, and moves on up the wall. I don't mind telling you kids that at that moment, I'm crying, I'm sobbing like a baby, I'm panting with rage and screaming at the top of my voice. But finally I get a grip on myself. I have a look around me and I notice that there is no one else in the crack. I'm the only one who made it back. That Roaring Noise got everything. My whole family, all our supplies,' and here, Da's voice wavers a little, and he pauses before continuing, 'at least I'm alive, I tell myself, I'm safe, here in the Crack, it can't possibly get me. The Great Roaring Noise is still out there, but for the moment, it moves on and leaves me alone. Nevertheless, I wedge myself in tight at the back of the Crack, get all my eight legs in close, and push against the walls.'

'It came back didn't it?' squeaked Pip.

'Yes, my little one,' said Da, gathering Pip under his foreleg, 'it came back. But this time it comes right up to the Crack, sucking and pulling. The pressure was incredible. The wind was so great. It felt like my insides were being sucked out my mouth. There was nothing I could do, so I let go.'

Nine little gasps of astonishment punctured the dusty dark.

'Then what happened?' breathed Bobbin. He had a raspy nasal voice that sounded like he had a permanent cold. Da said that he was probably allergic to house dust in the Belly of the Roaring Noise.

'Well, I remember flying through the dark like I was falling down into a great pit, and then nothing.' Da looked slowly around at his children. 'When I came to my senses, I was here. Oh, those first few moments were horrible. I'm feeling around me in the dark, and the dust is so thick that I feel like I'm breathing nothing but dirt. All around me I hear screaming. There are spiders everywhere. Your family, and all the

other great families of the North Roof. All the different ones too, even the big black ones, all mixed together. Most of them with missing legs, and some of them, poor souls, have been turned inside out like a sock by the Great Noise. Then I hear my sister,' and here Da's voice fell so quiet that they all had to lean in to catch the next bit, 'Your dear mother. She's lying right here in this corner where we are now, and I can see at once that she's hurt bad. She whispers to me to come near. "I'm done for," she croaks. I hold her close and say, "No way, you'll make it Mildred –" but she shakes her wise old head. "You know what to do," she says. And I do, but I don't want to. "It's for the children," she says, "Do it for the children." And I'm weeping and wailing, but I have to, so I take my teeth, and tear open her abdomen. Then, with a great cry, she dies, and in that moment, you all tumble from out of her, and that's when I take each one of you, each a tiny, but already fertilised egg, and I tuck you in the dust, away from the other spiders, and all the terrible things that live down here, and as I do so, I name each and every one of you.'

Da looked around at all their little faces, so intent, so serious. He had never told them the whole story before, and none would move a muscle in case he stopped. They didn't want to hear it, but at the same time, each of them wanted to know their history, their whole history, for the first time in their short lives. With his foreleg, Da indicated each of the assembled spiders in turn.

'You Seamus, you were first born and brave, you have always been. Fastest and strongest of all your brothers and sisters, then Blod of course, the sweetest and gentlest of you all, then Nero, and you, Grace, tangled up together in each other's legs, inseparable at birth as you have been ever since. Bobbin was next. What can I say, he tumbled out like a jack in the box ready for action, and hasn't stopped since!' Da gently cuffed him about the head. 'And you, Buck, always ready to eat anything and everything. I'll never forget that day you tried to eat that marble and broke one of your fangs.' A little ripple of mirth passed around the group, their abdomens shaking as they giggled at one of the family's most cherished stories. 'And of course, not forgetting Pip, though I swear that squeak will be the death of us all, and Max and Jax, always fighting. You two,' said Da sternly. 'Just remember that family don't eat family, no matter what! You hear me?'

They both solemnly nodded, remembering that day, in the depths of a terrible hunger, when Max had chewed off Jax's back leg. Max hadn't been able to sit down for a week after Da had finished with him. They all smiled at the memory.

‘Except for Mother,’ piped up Ten.

‘Yes,’ replied Da, gruffly, ‘well, that was different. She would have wanted it that way. I don’t think I would have made it through those dark times without your mother’s ample body to feed you all. Particularly you, Ten, you were so small, I used to mistake you for a speck of dust in those days.’

They all laughed. Despite having a ferocious appetite, Ten was still the smallest of them all, by far.

‘Now listen up, all of you, and listen carefully. Never forget that you are descended from one of the great families, and you must stick together, even when I am gone.’

At this mention of a life without Da, Pip gave a little sob.

‘None of that now Pip, you have to be strong. That is what makes us different from him over there,’ said Da in a hoarse whisper. ‘I’ll never forget those early days. They had no mercy for each other, because you understand, he wasn’t the only cockroach in the belly of this beast.’

‘There were more of them?’ said Bobbin.

‘Oh yes, there were small ones and big ones and skinny ones and fat ones. But when they got hungry, they turned on each other, the filthy animals.’ And here Da lowered his voice as if he didn’t want the cockroach to hear, and whispered, ‘They even ate their own children!’ They all gasped in horror at the thought.

Da shook his head solemnly. ‘Old Man Cockroach over there, he’s just the last cockroach standing!’ Da spat a long thin stream of venom into the dust to underline just what he thought of that. ‘They have no sense of family, they are nothing but the scum of the earth, and maybe one day, when we find a way out of here, once more when we rule the sky,’ said Da, his voice thick with emotion, ‘we’ll be free of them forever!’

‘There must be a way out of here,’ said Seamus, fiercely.

‘Maybe there is son, maybe there isn’t,’ replied Da, slowly, weighing his words carefully. ‘I haven’t had much time, what with looking out for you all, to turn my thoughts to that. I feel in my waters that there is, and if there’s anyone who can find a way out of the Belly of the Great Roaring Noise, it’s...’

But they never did hear what their beloved Da would have said next. It all happened so fast. In flash, Old Man Cockroach was upon them.

‘Run children,’ screamed Da, ‘Run to the ten corners of the earth! I’ll hold him off.’

With a great war cry, Da threw himself at the cockroach. The old warrior was taken by surprise for a second; he had never seen a spider move so nimbly. As the children ran to hide themselves amongst the dust piles and the collected bric a brac of lost thimbles and scrunched up tissues, wads of chewing gum and safety pins, bread bag ties and lost 5c pieces, Da climbed on the back of the cockroach and bravely sank his fangs into the cockroach’s back. But the Old Man hadn’t outlasted every other cockroach in the Belly of the Beast to be taken by surprise by a simple spider, and with a flick of his ragged wings, he threw Da from his back. Turning with the speed of a boxer, his legs working in opposite directions like a well-oiled tank, armour flexing as he did so, the cockroach pinned Da to the ground with one of his legs. His hideous mouth hovered over Da, mandibles slicing the air like knives.

But the Old Man hesitated for a moment. The truth was, that cockroaches didn’t really like spider too much. That’s why he had left them to last. They were too bitter for his taste. But he had no choice anymore, he was starving, and besides, they were so arrogant, they deserved to die.

Fighting back the urge to vomit, he got a firm grip on the spider’s skull with his jaws, taking care to avoid those fangs, because despite being so feeble, spiders were also quite poisonous. He bit down gently, feeling Da’s skull flex in his mouth. The cockroach thought he might just carefully rip off the spider’s head, where the poisonous glands were, before sitting down to a nice nibble on those legs. They were more to his taste.

Da screamed in agony, and nine other voices echoed him, as his charges watched in horror from their hiding places. They screamed, and the screams got louder and louder until the noise filled the air, and in that moment, a sort of miracle happened. A great wind picked Old Man Cockroach up, and slammed him against the back wall of the Beast. His wings; crippled and chewed and broken from his many battles, were his undoing. The wind had got underneath them and they opened out like an old umbrella in a storm, lifting the old cockroach up in the air, slamming him against the back wall. For what seemed like an eternity, the Roaring Noise screamed through the belly as more and more dust piled on top of dust. All the children were safe though. Da had been training them from birth to run and hide themselves in the soft piles of dust, upon his command. When he had cried, ‘Run to the Ten Corners of

the Earth' they had instinctively obeyed him, just as he had drilled it into them, time and time again. Somehow, he must've known that this day would come. But Old Man Cockroach did not fare so well. His wings were twisted backward by the force of the wind, his nose ground into the dust, his body pelted with the rubbish of the screaming void. Then they heard, above the wind, a strange rattling noise coming towards them.

Then complete silence.

'Shit!'

A voice from outside.

'Bugger.'

Then a clicking noise, and from where Seamus crouched, safely nestled in the house dust, he saw a giant round window open in the roof of the Belly. The most dazzling light he had ever seen, shone down from above in a golden shaft, burning his eyes, but he couldn't look away. Then an eye as big as three spiders, like a watery globe, pressed against the giant window.

'Oh for god's sake, Dave, have you got the tongs? The bloody vacuum cleaner's sucked up my tweezers.'

As Seamus's eyes adjusted to this rich and wonderful light, he couldn't help but follow the shaft of light as it cut through the thick cloud of dust that had been stirred up by the Noise, and there, against the back wall, where the heavenly shaft of light illuminated a small circle of the dust on the back wall of the Belly of the Beast, lay the most ghastly spectacle.

Old Man Cockroach, his body twisted and broken, was skewered to the ground by a shiny pair of steel tweezers piercing his vile belly, and in his jaws, firmly gripped between his mandibles was their beloved Da's head.

Without knowing where it came from, and without even thinking, Seamus lifted his voice, the sum of all Da's patient lessons coursing through his body, and cried, 'Run my children, to the air, to the air!' and without hesitation, the nine sons and daughters of Da, ran up the sides of the Belly, and out through the light drenched window in the roof of the Great Roaring beast, and down its shiny sides. They fled for the cracks in the walls, and for the high places where the gentle night breezes blow: the breeze, that to this day, still guides the delicious flying things of the air into their skilfully woven webs.

And all the children of Da, through their countless generations since, have been taught from birth, to fear the Great Roaring Noise.

No more do they shake their webs in vain attempts to frighten the thing away. Now they know better. As soon as the Voice of the Beast is heard, they flee for the Deepest of the Cracks, behind the ceiling boards, where they have learnt that they will be safe, free from the Terrible Breath of the Great Roaring Noise.