



from
dark
places

E.J. NEWMAN

PUBLISHED BY eMERGENT PUBLISHING
Brisbane, Australia & London, United Kingdom
www.emergent-publishing.com

ISBN 978-0-9807446-5-1

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www.eneuman.co.uk

Front Cover Image
“Woman Walking Through Hall” © Özur Donmaz
www.ozgurdonmaz.com

Cover Design
Kate Harding of www.artemisdesign.co.uk

Typesetting: eMergent Publishing

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First published in Australia, 2011

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Dedicated to the members of my Short Story Club, whose prompts inspired many of the stories within this anthology.

Thank you for your enthusiasm and support.

from dark places

Katie carried a small claw hammer and seven galvanised box nails wrapped in a handkerchief. They were the last in the pack. She had to make each one count.

She crept out of her room. The old house creaked and pipes knocked as the central heating system cooled. She'd always hated this hour. As a child, she spent her nights listening to these sounds while her parents slept, oblivious to her terror. Accompanying the noises, shadowy forms lurked under her bed, in the wardrobe, between the walls and in the attic; defeated only by electric lights and cuddles from her Daddy. A decade later she couldn't admit to still being afraid of the nocturnal sounds of the house. Nor her enduring fear of the dark.

At least now she knew those awful knocks came from the contracting pipes, not someone or something trying to get in. But the other sounds, the ones only she heard—they couldn't be conquered by lights, nor her father.

In the darkness, the hallway stretched ahead of her and mentally she ran through the pattern of squeaky floor boards between her doorway and the stairs. This trip had been practised in the daylight hours before she'd made the first one at night several weeks earlier. Each successful sortie had increased her confidence, but not made it any easier.

Go, she thought, knowing the minutes to the hour ticked by

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while she hovered close to her bedroom. The window of opportunity would be gone for another twenty four if she waited any longer and she didn't want tomorrow to be as difficult as today.

She stepped into the hallway, not daring to switch on the penlight torch in her pocket yet; she'd save it for downstairs. Right now she just had to be brave and make it down the hall, the stairwell and into the living room. Then she could begin. Sock covered feet flexed and relaxed, tip-toeing across the floor boards, the fluffy cotton muffling the sound of contact. Tight black leggings and a lycra top minimised the potential of rustling fabric. Even her long, black hair was tied back, but she'd stopped short of blackening her pale face commando style.

At her parent's door she paused, checking for the gentle rhythm of her father's snoring.

Silence.

Damn, is he still awake this late?

"I think we need to take her to a doctor." Her stepmother's words slid under the door and seized her by the throat. "Jim? Have you fallen asleep?"

"No." Her father's sigh froze her to the spot, the tightness in her throat making it hard for her to breath. The thought of creeping past was replaced by the irresistible temptation to listen in. "I guess you're right. I've been trying to avoid that, but I agree, it's time. I just thought I could handle it."

"You're a counsellor, not a psychiatrist. She needs a doctor, someone who can prescribe something, this behaviour just isn't normal."

"What's normal?"

"Don't give me that 'definition of normality' crap. Banging nails into all our stuff in the dead of night isn't anywhere near the normal part of the bell curve."

Katie scowled.

'Our' stuff? No. Dad's and Mum's. Not yours Jen.

"I know." Another sigh. Her father was tired again, but not from a long day of helping others with their problems. She felt guilty.

I'm doing this to him.

"It's got to be some kind of psychosis or drugs. Either way, a doctor will be able to help."

"It's not drugs, Katie wouldn't take them, I made sure of that."

She knows exactly what they do to the brain.” Her faced loosened into a smile at her father’s defence. He was right. It wasn’t drugs.

“Then it’s a psychosis. Which makes sense, really.”

There was a pause, just long enough for Katie to remember the menace of the darkness pressing in on her.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” He was angry, the tone in his voice changing, even though the words remained barely audible.

“I mean, it might be genetic.”

“You don’t know anything about what happened to her mother. Don’t try and make a diagnosis based on something you know nothing about.” Katie leant closer to the door, desperate to learn about the one person they never spoke of.

“I know she went crazy.” Jen’s words sliced through the night. “You told me, back when you used to share things with me.”

“Don’t turn this into something about us... Not now.” Another sigh. Katie tried not to be thrilled by the sound of them struggling.

Maybe they’ll get divorced?

“Look, I’ll talk to her in the morning, okay? And I’ll call Jeff, see if he’s willing to get involved.”

Get involved?

The words made her nauseous, the small moment of joy at the idea of her father divorcing Jen gone. She didn’t want anyone to be involved. They shouldn’t—mustn’t know about this. The clock struck the hour and her shoulders dropped.

Too late.

It was coming. She felt it, in the silences between the rituals oiling the wheels of their morning, the agony of the false niceties preceding the day. She saw it in the looks exchanged over breakfast; Jen watching her father to make sure he didn’t lose his resolve. The ever present pressure of filtering out the other voice wore her out before the clock chimed in the eighth hour of the day. The hustle-bustle drama of her step-mother’s departure for work played itself out and then it arrived; the moment alone with her father.

“Katie, have you got a minute? I want to talk to you about something.” He asked so casually, in that gentle way which made him such a sought-after counsellor.

“I’ve got something I want—”

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“It’s important,” he insisted. “Please, we need to talk.”

Katie conceded by turning on the kettle. The scraping of chairs on the wooden floor, the obligatory steaming mugs placed between them. It was impossible to have the ‘Conversation’ without tea.

“What do you want to talk about?” Katie tried hard to maintain the much studied teenage nonchalance, now practised for so long it was almost second nature.

“We haven’t talked for a while, I just wanted to... check in.”

Is he backing out? Or just approaching the beast slowly?

“I’m fine.” The lie, so familiar, didn’t need to be considered before leaving her mouth.

He leaned in. “You look tired.”

There was no denying the exhaustion. She looked wrecked. Like a girl who hadn’t had a proper night’s sleep for weeks.

What can I say? I am tired. Beyond tired.

“I’m just finding it hard to sleep.”

Urgh, that look, the concerned father look where the professional counsellor face masks his quiet panic about how to do this the right way.

“Are you waking up early?”

“No.”

“Going to bed late?”

Her hands tightened around her mug, she focused on the burning heat. *Don’t go there.*

She shrugged. “S’pose.”

“How do you feel when you wake up?”

“Dad, stop it. I’m not depressed.”

He smirked at her response.

He doesn’t know whether to be proud or worried.

They both concentrated on their tea, sipping and resting after the first round. Back into their respective corners, looking at their opponent, searching for a weakness in their defence.

“I’m worried about you.”

She nodded. “I’m not doing drugs, Dad.”

“I know that. I know you’re not stupid. But I think you’re... troubled by something.”

‘Troubled.’ What an absurd word.

“I’m fine. Just tired. I know you’re worried about me being alright for school next week. I will be, really.”

She watched him look into his tea. Her defence had worked so far. Thank God for the image of teenagers beamed at him every night on TV. She could hide behind hormonal moodiness, angst about course decisions, and stress about fictional boyfriends. Anything to distract him from the truth.

“What is going on Katie?”

She jumped. “That question in less than five minutes? You *are* worried.”

“Don’t be smart with me, just tell me what’s wrong. I can see something’s up, why don’t you tell me so I can help?”

She searched his face. He was going grey, not just above his ears but all around his hairline and the wrinkles around his eyes seemed deeper. He looked tired too. For a moment, she considered telling him, but then she heard the voice again, choking the urge to tell him anything. She looked down at her own mug.

“It’s just teenage stuff, Dad. You know.”

She expected him to back off, feel he’d done his duty, but he didn’t move. Nor was there a silent show of solidarity in the squeeze of the hand. She looked back up, forcing her attention to stay on him and not be pulled away by the other voice. He scrutinised her, looking for the weak spot in her defence.

She got up. “You’ve got a client in ten minutes. I’ll see you for lunch.”

His shoulders dropped and his frown softened into one of defeat. She turned away to rush up the stairs before she changed her mind. She hated what this was doing to him, but the less he knew, the better. She heard him rattling a drawer in the old dresser in the downstairs hallway, before swearing loudly.

That one she’d nailed shut the night before last. Just to be certain.

By the time the clock struck midnight, Katie was beyond exhaustion. Between avoiding any time with her father and fighting the urge to shout back at the noisiest voices, she felt utterly drained. School started in two days, and she had to nail the last space shut before then, otherwise school would be unbearable.

She waited as long as possible into the first hour of the new day before setting off, clad in her amateur ninja clothes, holding

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the hammer and nails, and breathing deeply. She had to do it tonight. She had to get some sleep. She had to make her father think everything was all right.

Her father's gentle snore reassured her all was well when she paused outside his door and then continued on, down the hall and stairs looking like a drunkard, swaying from one side to the other as she avoided the squeaky boards and steps. Through the downstairs hall, stopping momentarily to retrieve the torch from her pocket, padding past the mirror that she took care not to look in and finally into the living room, closing the door gently behind her.

She'd left the grandfather clock until last, reluctant to defile what had been her mother's favourite possession, even if it gave her the creeps. Crouching at its base, Katie laid the handkerchief on the floor and removed the nails, trying not to think of it as a family heirloom, and more as a problem in need of a solution. She'd never liked it anyway.

With the penlight torch jammed between her lips, she wrapped the head of the hammer in the fabric, selected a particularly shiny nail and focused on the door of the casing. The foul thing ticked loudly at her, the cogs grinding through the remaining precious minutes of respite as she fumbled with the nail. It had to be positioned in just the right place; hidden from a casual glance, but still able to hold the door shut.

Her hand trembled and the nail wavered beneath the cushioned head of the hammer. Katie lifted it an inch above the tiny nail head and went to strike. Light flooded the room.

"Katie, what are you doing?"

She spun around to see her father, just inside the doorway, dressed in his tragic striped pyjamas, his hand still resting on the light switch. The nail dropped onto the floor, along with the torch. Her heart threatened to burst out of her chest.

She said nothing; there was no way to make this look innocent. While the two of them stared at each other across the living room, the clock struck away the seconds between her and the torment beginning again.

Desperate to get it done, regardless of whether he was there or not, she turned back, picked another nail and began to position it. Before she could swing the hammer he was there behind her, wrenching it from her hand and leaving her kneeling before the

infernal timepiece, tocking and ticking its way to the top of the hour.

“Dad!” She fought to wrestle it from his hand. “I need that!”

He held the hammer out of her reach effortlessly, his face a picture of horrified concern. “What the hell are you doing?” he repeated.

“Just let me nail it shut and I’ll tell you!”

“You’re not nailing anything shut young lady. And especially not that clock. It’s nearly two hundred years old. Now tell me what you’re doing for Christ’s sake!”

She glanced back at the clock face. Less than four minutes left! She felt sick.

“Give me the hammer!” she yelled, tears pricking at her eyes. “Dad, please!”

He stepped back from her, frowning. She lunged for it, grabbing at his wrist, he raised it even higher, its backwards arc smashing into the light fitting and plunging the room back into darkness, save a sliver of yellow torchlight stretching across the floor.

“Now look what you’ve done,” he said, pushing her away. “Katie, don’t move. There’s glass everywhere.”

“I don’t care, give me the hammer.”

When he made no move to hand the tool back, she threw the nail down and balled up her fists. “I have to nail the door shut!” she yelled. “It’s the last place they can get in.”

“Who?”

“Them! The—things, the people that come out and talk to me.” The confession burst from her.

“Things? People? What on earth are you talking about?”

“The voices.” She started to sob. “They come through dark places, like—like drawers and cupboards and —”

“Katie, calm down,” he cried over her words. “This is just—oh God, this is not real ok? These things you hear aren’t real.”

“They are!” The words tore out of her, riding the pressure that had built up over weeks of keeping her secret. “They are real, and they tell me to do things, terrible things and I want them to stop. I have to keep them out.”

He said nothing for a moment, speechless as the meaning of her words sank in.

“Give me the hammer! Please,” she wept. “Give it to me Daddy

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before the clock strikes and they come through again.”

“Why don’t you look inside it?” The suggestion came from the shadow in the doorway, speaking with Jen’s voice. “Let her see there’s no-one in there.”

“We shouldn’t encourage this...” her father’s voice trailed off as Katie watched the shadowed form approach slowly.

Katie swallowed and wiped her eyes, not entirely certain it was her step-mother. “You don’t believe me, Daddy?”

He was still holding the hammer out of her reach.

“You said that things come through from dark places,” the shadow said. “Why don’t we open the clock and look inside?”

Katie frowned. “No. They won’t be there. They’re always quiet at this time.”

“Then we’ll wait till the hour strikes and then open the door.”

Katie backed away, but the shadow carried on until the shaft of torchlight revealed her step-mother wrapped in her father’s dressing gown, slippered feet gently crunching over the broken glass. She looked between her father and her stepmother uncertainly.

“You said it was the last place, if they’re not in there, then maybe you were wrong, and this will all be over,” her father said.

Now, with them here and the voices silent, her motivation had the edge of ridiculous about it. She nodded. “Okay, but only if you stay with me.”

“Of course I will.” Her father handed Jen the hammer and pulled her into an embrace. “Everything will be fine, I promise.”

The clock struck the hour. Katie tensed, waiting for the voices to return, but nothing happened. Her father picked up her torch from where it had landed, and went to the door of the clock casing.

“Ready?”

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. Her father turned the tiny brass key, that had always struggled to do its job, stealing herself for the sight of something staring back at her.

The door swung open, revealing nothing. It was empty. Her father made a show of shining the light into all the inside corners of the case, illuminating the weights and chains and cogs.

“There, see?” He smiled at her. “Nothing to be afraid of. It’s just a clock, that’s all.” He closed the door, turned the little key and looked at her. “Let’s get back to bed, and talk about this in the morning. I think you need to see someone who you can talk to

about this, someone who isn't your Dad."

Dazed, Katie nodded and allowed herself to be guided up the stairs and tucked back into bed like a small child. Her father even left the light on in the hallway for her and waited until her eyes closed. Katie slowed her breathing, pretending to sleep. She lay listening to the house shifting and groaning, her father's voice in a hushed conversation down the hall, but no other voices.

Maybe he's right?

She let her head sink into the pillow, as her father hid the claw hammer and nails, and switched off the light downstairs. By the time he climbed the stairs, sleep had taken her like a small death.

The light in her father's room flicked off and the tiny brass key turned silently in the lock. The door of the grandfather clock swung out. No creaking floorboards warned her of its approach, no sound alerted her to its arrival. It was only when it lifted a lock of hair from her pillow and whispered into her ear that she woke.

"We're going to have to do something about your father..."

the straw

God, I wish I'd never opened that box.

Even now, in the living room at the other end of the house, on a different floor, with the television loud and a whisky in my hand, I can see it, lurking in the back of the wardrobe, lid askew. She'll know I've found it.

The spirit hits the back of my throat and I wince. The single malt ran out days ago and I'm reduced to this; sitting on the edge of my sofa, knocking back cheap whisky, waiting for my wife to come home and the divorce to begin.

Here she is; key in the lock, door slam and keys dropped into the bowl, claws sliding on the new wooden floor in the hallway ending with the dog hitting the radiator.

"Hi Sid! Silly dog, still not used to it are you? You have to slow down. Yes." The sound of wet licking wrinkles my upper lip. "I love you too. Where's Daddy?"

"I'm not his 'Daddy', you stupid cow," I mutter.

The dog bursts in, tail beating a path of turbulent air celebrating her arrival.

"Hi," she says brightly, following him, thrusting a bottle of wine before her. "I got pizza to go with it. Do you want Pepperoni or Meat Feast?" She's too busy looking at the wine label to notice my knuckles go white, squeezing the glass. "Well?"

"Pepperoni," I spit and she breezes out again, oblivious. "You

bitch,” I add beneath my breath.

I listen to the din coming from the kitchen. How can she make so much noise unwrapping pizza? Humming and banging and crashing and the damn dog chewing the squeaky toy she bought just to piss me off.

That’s it. I slam the glass down, march into the kitchen.

“Hell of a day,” she moans, switching the oven on. “Would you believe that—”

“Leanne,” I say, cutting across the babble. “I know about your...” I struggle to find the words. “I found the box.”

“What box?”

“The one hidden in the wardrobe.”

She looks at me, all innocence. Oh, she’s good.

“The one with the pictures of —” Her hand flies to her mouth and a scarlet flush blooms across her cheeks. “Yeah,” I scowl. “That one.”

The dog savages the rubber bone in a constant barrage of protesting squeaks.

“How long?” My fists ball so tight my nails dig into my palms.

“You’re over-reacting.” She turns to fuss over the pizzas. “It’s just a —”

“I asked how long!”

The dog stops chewing and growls at me.

“What were you doing going through my private things?”

“You shouldn’t need to keep things from me!”

“If you weren’t such a control freak I wouldn’t have to!” she yells back and the dog’s hackles rise. “You know you’re being ridiculous, don’t you?”

I lower my voice, glancing at the dog. “I thought we understood each other.”

“Don’t make me the bad guy. There’s something wrong with you, not me. Why don’t you stop and ask why that box even exists?”

The question hangs between us as the thermostat light blinks out on the oven. Something wrong with me? That’d be right. She always misses the point. What the hell did I ever see in her?

“It doesn’t matter, you know how I feel, you should —”

“Oh shut up, Tony!”

“That’s it. It’s him or me!”

Her mouth sets in a tight line, her hands planted on her hips.

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“Go then, piss off back to your mother.”

She smirks. I try to think of a parting shot, but I’m so angry the words get jumbled up and all I can do is stare back balefully. Then it hits me. It’s over. What am I hanging around waiting for? I storm upstairs to pack.

The bag is only half full on the bed when I hear her coming up the stairs. This apology had better be good. When she enters, I stand back from the bed so she can come over and admit her guilt, but she walks to the wardrobe.

Dumbfounded, I watch her retrieve the box and look me straight in the eye before marching past with it held aloft like she’s carrying home the science prize. I ball my fury up into my fists again, forcing myself to punch the rest of the clothes into the bag, rather than her face.

Downstairs, I decide to give her one last chance, drawn back to the kitchen by the sound of her voice.

“Looks like it’s just you and me again, Sid,” she says to the dog, like that stupid mutt could understand her. “*You* can have the Pepperoni.”

I can hear her opening the box, and can’t stop myself peering through the gap in the doorway. She removes the lid and smiles, lifting out the DVD resting on top. Her fingers play over his face, the BBC logo, the letters of ‘Pride and Prejudice’.

“And you and I can have the Meat Feast, Mr Darcy.”

I grimace, sickened. Time to go.