

Not Before Bed

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A note from the Author

Hello, Reader.

I like you already. You've glanced at the cover, perhaps read the blurb, and you've opened up this book to see what it's all about. That shows curiosity, imagination, and even a little bravery. I can see we're going to get on.

I've been fascinated with Speculative Fiction for as long as I can remember, which means I was probably fascinated before that. And as long as that has been happening, I've been drawn to the shadows. Nothing rocks my socks more than a creeping spectre, a questing tentacle in the dark. Poe and Lovecraft are my Gods.

And that's what got me started with these stories.

It all began with *Upon Waking*, a story that I literally scribbled down longhand in a manner that the title suggests. And after being encouraged by my partner, Laura (who will actually be my wife by the time you read this), to submit the story to the British Fantasy Society, I was hooked.

I am an addict, and I am not ashamed.

Author Crack is my drug (also known by the street names Scribbler's Ruin, Screw The Day Job, and Insomnia Dust), and it gives me a rush from every idea, every new chapter, every *The End*. When I'm denied it, I'm cranky to say the least. If you should ever find me in this state, there are two ways to handle it; either lay me down and whisper snatches of Poe until I start to suck my thumb, or throw a notepad and pen from a safe distance and wait until my eyes have glazed over. It will then be safe to approach.

What you're about to read is the result of being on that drug. It is not pretty. It may lead to a fretful sleep. But it certainly has been fun.

I hope to see you hovering over another of my pages in the near future.

Embrace the Weird, my friends.

Craig Hallam (2013)

Laughter on the Landing



IT WAS PERFECT. With light spilling in from the enormous windows and its open plan layout, the apartment was just what I'd been looking for. It was a little cold, but that was to be expected. A dilapidated warehouse on London Wharf had been refurbished into a trio of apartments; partly because they were listed as buildings of interest, partly because the housing situation in our not-so-fair capital had reached breaking point. Still, it was overlooking the river, separate from the other buildings in the area and that suited me. The light and isolation would work wonders for my writing.

The sound of creaking floorboards tracked someone's movements on the floor above.

"Oh, that's the only real problem with this place," said the estate agent, who waved it away as if it were inconsequential. "A bit rickety on the floors. It's a young woman and her daughter upstairs. They don't make much noise and you probably won't see them. She

stays at home to look after the little girl; she's quite sick. Shame really."

"What about downstairs?"

There was still another apartment below, or so I thought. I wanted to make sure that no hairy biker type was going to beat me up every time I walked to the loo.

"No one down there. Just storage," he said.

"The noise won't be a problem."

"I doubt you'll even notice it after a while," he said. He straightened up his frame, which just made his gut stick out further, and spread his arms to encompass the world.

"So, what do you think?"

"I'll take it."

I'VE NEVER BEEN so productive. Fingers rattled on keys like the clack of an old locomotive. The sun scuttled toward night like a beetle making for its hole and I realised that I hadn't eaten all day.

Stories and articles poured out onto my overheating laptop, whizzed their way across the electronic postal service, and often returned with rejection emails attached. Still, I was happy and times seemed good.

The noises from the floor above didn't intrude on my concentration. In fact, they added to it. My previous apartment in the middle of Willesden had been terrible. The murmur of traffic and watching feet tramp by my below ground window had driven me to distraction. I was constantly aware of a world outside the front door

and it dragged me away from the places I created in words. But here on the wharf, I felt as if the whole world were empty, uninteresting, and that my laptop contained all the characters I needed.

The sounds from above worked their magic. I felt as if I weren't alone while having the place to myself. Sometimes, after lunch (if I remembered to have it) I would lay and listen to footsteps and murmurs of speech, imagining what they were doing up there. I felt like a mortal eavesdropping on the affairs of gods.

A young woman and her little girl, the estate agent had said. I pictured them in my head, forging them into stereotypes. I generally avoided them in my writing but liked to indulge when not working. How can you break the rules and stretch the stereotype if you don't acknowledge their existence? And so the woman who lived above me was slightly smaller than myself, slender with childbearing hips, her brown hair tied into a loose ponytail as she washed the dishes at the sun-streaming window. She looked down with adoration at the little girl making shapes with some of her mother's left over pastry. Standing on a chair to reach the kitchen table, flour dappled the oversized apron which hung down below the girl's feet. The white powder smeared her face, a ruddy glow beneath. The very visage of domestic bliss. Except there was no father figure. No one for the little girl to run to when they came home from work.

My mind turned.

The girl lay in bed; that was why I never heard the softer footsteps of a child above me. Hair clung to her glistening brow in serpentine strands and her eyes were heavy like tomb lids. I fought to regain the previous sunshine image, but couldn't. Distressed, I swung my legs off the couch. I had to rein in my imagination. It had a tendency to sabotage me at a whim. A foul taste rose in my mouth, as if left by the swiftly declining dream. I didn't know what they were really like but the little girl's image haunted me for the rest of the day; her ashen face and wistful movements, tiny limbs tired from the sickness. It blocked my writing, and I soon gave up entirely.

Daytime television: the nearest thing to oblivion we mortals can achieve while still breathing. Slumped in front of the screen, I tried to forget. Time and again the small girl's sallow skin rose before my eyes, and something struck me.

For the next few days, I applied progressively sinister explanations to the noises above and harnessed them. Fashioning the darkest tales I have ever written, the cryptic noises fuelled the darkest, most disturbing reaches of my imagination.

Tortured souls kicked their feet across naked floorboards as they were dragged helplessly by fiends. Things with no name and no face bumped and jostled in the pitch abyss over my head. The mysterious apartment above my own became a fountain of terror.

The tales I wrote were my best yet and I secretly thanked the noises when I received my first magazine acceptance. Then I set the dark tales aside. During the course of my writing, I had managed to scare myself and needed to return to lighter material before I was tortured by my own imagination.

STRANGE HOW THE brain eventually brushes away something that was once so tangible as to cause genuine, though illogical, fear. The upstairs noises had been driven into the background of my mind and I barely noticed them unless I wanted to.

I still hadn't met the only other inhabitants of my building and wasn't particularly bothered about pursuing it. Knowing that the woman upstairs was home all the time, she would no doubt know that I was too. I didn't want her dropping in for tea and biscuits at every opportunity and dislodging my concentration. I know, that's extremely selfish but remember that I took this apartment for the peace, not camaraderie.

However, it seemed fate that I meet the woman upstairs.

I was busily typing, giving myself square eyes and a healthy little migraine, when the thump came. So sudden and heavy was the sound that I swear I felt it in the boards beneath my own feet. Having been engrossed in my work, I didn't know if it was the first sudden sound. It could have been the third or fourth for all I

knew. Stopping dead in mid-sentence, I held my breath, waited to see whether there would be another.

My imagination went into that familiar overdrive. There was something about this apartment that always made me think the worst, like an itch at the back of the brain. What if the little girl had collapsed, or her mother had slipped in the shower? Suddenly, I became aware that I was the only human being who could be roused for assistance if something horrible happened on the floor above. I was halfway to the door before I realised that I had reacted at all. Sheer instinct had driven me across my apartment. Whoever said that humans are cruel by their very nature would have choked on their words if they'd seen me.

I admit, as I bounded up the wide stairs, I felt somewhat heroic. As I banged on the door images swept past me of how I could react to any situation that presented itself, highly sharpened and blindingly fast from the adrenalin. When she answered in perfect calm, I ground to a halt like a juggernaut stopping for a bunny rabbit.

“Can I help you?” she said. She stood in the narrowest gap between door and jamb, dressed in what appeared to be a workout outfit. I compared my imagined image of the woman upstairs to the reality. Her hair was blonde where I had pictured brunette, she was muscular and obviously worked out rather than the typical mother figure my mind portrayed.

Stood there on the landing, sweating like a lunatic, I felt such an idiot. She looked petrified – and rightly so. After all, in her doorway stood a stranger in bare feet, a pair of ancient jeans and t-shirt, sweating and panting. No wonder she was dubious. I must have looked like a psychotic hobo.

“Erm...” I began, pathetically. “I heard a noise, downstairs, and just wondered if you were ok.”

“Oh,” she said. And didn’t offer much else. She simply looked me up and down.

“Sorry,” I said, unsure of what else to say.

“Don’t be, it’s...sweet. You just look a little-”

“Mental?”

“A little,” she said.

She smiled behind her hand as if she didn’t want me to see a crooked tooth. I noticed an old wound, a scratch on her bare forearm. Maybe she had a cat. There were many things I didn’t know about this woman, that was obviously one of them. She had probably bought it for the girl. A pet for the sick child. I hoped that the animal didn’t scratch at her too.

“Well, I won’t pester you for a cup of sugar or anything. As long as you’re ok.”

I turned away, aware that I’d just made a terrible neighbour joke, and started down the stairs. She called from behind me:

“Thank you!”

“No problem. I hope your daughter feels better soon.” A stupid thing to say. I knew the girl had been ill

for a long while. What were the chances of her getting better from something like that?

I heard the faint sound of the woman catching her breath. I had said the wrong thing. Idiot. Her door clicked closed as I reached my own landing.

That's why I write. I'm no good at talking. My internal monologue is excellent but when it comes to speaking, especially to pretty neighbours, I'm lost. I cursed myself for idiocy for the next few days and remained vigilant for sounds of distress from the floor above.



THE LITTLE GIRL I never saw, but after my embarrassing flight up the stairs, I saw Jennifer more and more.

The lid of the bin shut with a bang and I turned to find her behind me, a large bag of refuse in either hand. It was strange to see her in the sun and her complexion almost completely reflected the light. She spent far too much time inside. I offered to take the bags for her and she let me, even though she was clearly capable of doing it herself. The muscles in her arms put mine to shame. When I lifted the bags, they were heavier than she made them look.

She smiled sweetly, always covering her mouth like a giggling school girl. She was pretty, but I found myself completely uninterested. Maybe she had too much baggage, maybe my life was too busy (as I always told

myself), or maybe it was the fact that I knew I'd never stand a chance with someone like her. She was out of my league, even with the emotional baggage and social isolation that must come with a chronically sick child.

"How is she?" I asked, as I always did. I felt it appropriate to let her know that other people cared what happened to her daughter. I'm afraid I'm painfully observant at times, or maybe I pry without realising it. Anyway, I'd never seen Jenny and her daughter receive visitors. Only the old man who delivered her shopping on a Thursday. There was no sign of a significant other, no grandparents and no friends. I lived a similar way, preferring my own company, but I didn't have a sick child to care for.

"Not too bad," she said. "She's eaten something at least."

"That's a good sign," I said, trying to placate her with obvious statements. In my defence, my medical experience was restricted to putting on plasters and using antibacterial hand wash. All I knew was that eating was good, not eating was bad.

She didn't answer, but gave a tight-lipped smile. We walked back into the building together and I watched her climb the stairs to her tower; Rapunzel trapped by the love for her child.

I don't like to admit it, but I hoped for a swift end for the girl then. I stood in the brick and wood hallway, in broad daylight, and hoped that a child would die peacefully and swiftly for the sake of her mother. I have

never gotten over the sensation of self-disgust that came swiftly after, no matter how much I try to tell myself that it is natural to have such thoughts. Everyone who has ever nursed a sick relative must have felt the same, no matter how fleeting. I wondered if Jenny had. I instantly tried to take it back and hoped that no demons were listening in on my mind, waiting for an errant selfish wish to grant.

THE SOUNDS FROM Jenny's apartment became a reason for me to visit. I know what I said earlier, but that was before I met her. Now, I felt compelled to give her just a little break, even for five minutes. Just to let her see another human face was my only intention. I certainly never stepped over the threshold. Standing on the landing, Jenny tucked into the gap in her doorway, we would pass the time of day under the pretence that I was checking on her safety. The noises were various in style and volume. Some were a scraping sound, as if of heavy padded objects being moved, obviously furniture being moved; some were thuds as a chair was replaced, or a can of beans were dropped. Often there were voices, which I always attributed to television since I never saw anyone come and go. I would bound up the stairs (the only exercise I ever took) and rap jauntily at the door. Sometimes she would already be waiting for me. After a while I began sharing my theories on what the sounds were, trying to make them funny or elaborate to amuse her. She would always smile and give a perfectly rational

cause for everything, explaining away every knock and bump, and I would pretend to be a dolt, slapping my forehead and rolling my eyes. We had quite the skit going. It could have gone on stage.

I was never invited in and I never wanted to. We were just fine laughing on the landing.

WEDNESDAYS WERE MY day off. I don't know why I chose that day rather than the typical Sunday, but I did. Maybe it was so that I could go out when everything was open for business, just so that I wouldn't waste my day.

On this particular Wednesday I sat on my couch, feet up on the coffee table, and sipped my coffee. As a rule I don't read books while I'm writing. If I enjoy the style of the novel I find it creeping in to my own work. I'd hate to be sued for plagiarism; I can't afford it. So, I was reading the newspaper. It's alright to only read it once a week; the same vital stories are rewritten a hundred times in a week anyway, so I never worry I'll miss anything.

A sound unfamiliar to me caught my ear. It descended as always through the creaking boards that made my ceiling. Anxiety gripped me and I set aside my paper to listen. The sound was a voice. Low and rumbling, much different from Jenny's mid range murmur. It was unmistakably male. I knew it wasn't the television as it was directly above me. I had ascertained over the last few months that Jenny's television was over

the other side of the room and it never made any other sound than the pops and whistles of children's shows. I set my thoughts aside, sure that it would just be the delivery man arriving a day early, and returned to my paper. Anyway, how would it look if Jenny had got herself a date and her nosey neighbour turned up?

I blocked out the voices and continued to read.

Scree scree scru scree: They moved to the kitchen.

Rrrrhhum: The chair pulled out.

I couldn't help but hear.

Gumngbromnan: The man's voice.

Momonah: Jenny's.

Grubm. Rorandhum?: He asked a question. There was a tone there that set me on edge. Not anger or violence. It sounded like surprise.

How could I be translating incoherent sounds? Was I *that* used to eavesdropping?

As I wondered, silence had fallen. They were quiet now. Maybe kissing. It would be nice if Jenny had found someone. She certainly needed it and my useless attempts at pseudo-friendship lacked a certain something.

Then a sound from inside my own apartment. If it hadn't been for the silence, I would never have heard it.

Poit.

I leant to see around my feet, which were still up on the coffee table.

A drip. A splotch of dark crimson on the oak surface. For a second, I watched it as if waiting for

something to happen. It did. Another droplet fell in the same spot.

Plit.

Drawn upward, my eyes widened.

On the ceiling, a line of the same fluid had trickled before dripping. It was leaking through the floorboards in Jenny's apartment—

Before I knew, I was half way up the stairwell.

Not stopping for the door, I barged in, reeling when it didn't move as fast as I'd expected. Stumbling across the hallway, I almost fell into the living area and turned, ready to fight off Jenny's attacker.

The man sat at the table in his grey suit, his face pressed against the wood until it bent his nose out of shape, eyes staring blindly at the surface next to him as if spying on a line of ants. His skull was the wrong shape, and it oozed a viscous fluid onto the table top which ran to the edge and dribbled into a puddle on the floorboards.

"Jenny!" I yelled. The shock of seeing the stranger in such a state rooted me to the spot. I should go in and find her, make sure she's alright. But I couldn't move.

"Here," came a weak reply. I span about so fast that my eyes blurred and I thought I would pass out. Darting back through the hall, I made for the living room.

Whoever had designed our apartments had very different things in mind. This was obviously built for privacy where my own was intended for modern living. Jenny's apartment had doors and alcoves. Every room

was entirely separate from the next. It was homely where mine was spacious; cosy where mine was cold.

On an old embroidered couch last in fashion in the 80s, her hands covered in scarlet spatters, sat Jenny.

I stepped forward, and stopped dead.

“Jenny, what ha-.”

The words caught in my throat like wire.

In the corner of the room, beneath the window, was a cage. A large cage. The type you would buy for an unruly Rottweiler. Curled inside with the mesh casting crosshatch patterns on her hair and body was Jenny’s daughter. She was sick, but not in the way I’d imagined. Blonde hair had been dirtied to brown in matted clumps and at first I thought she had been beaten bloody. Her face was sullied with stains and her fingernails were dark as if from burrowing.

She was eating.

The flaccid fingers of a dismembered hand hung from her dainty digits. She nibbled at a well-manicured finger delicately, like a squirrel with a taste for nail varnish.

The child looked up, still chewing on raw meat. Her eyes were so heavily bloodshot as to appear almost black, and colder than a killer’s. Not a glimmer of childhood. If I didn’t know better I would have said she was no more alive than the man sat at Jenny’s kitchen table. The girl’s clothing was torn as if she had lived under a bridge all her life, her teeth stained with dried blood. This feral child’s existence seemed impossible to me.

With her mother sat a few feet away, staring at her hands, I was certain that I was hallucinating.

I forced Jenny's name from my lips once more but received no answer.

With my trance broken at the sound of my own voice, I finally recoiled, forced myself back against the wall.

Jenny looked up at me. Her cheek was sprayed with a fine mist of blood from where she had turned her face away while attending to the stranger in the kitchen. Tears streamed down her face, contorted into a portrait of anguish.

She moved toward me, and I didn't run. I couldn't.

"Please," she said, her voice raw with crying. "She's alright. It's just when she gets hungry. She gets so hungry."

She reached out to me with her blood-plastered hand and I turned away from her pleading face.

With the child's dead eyes still on me, her mother growing closer, my voice released a desperate whisper.

"No."

I closed my eyes and waited for the sticky touch. None came. Whether through instinct or divine intervention, I threw myself to the side. Chunks of crumbling plaster peppered my face and hair. Dazed, I lashed out with my feet and Jenny fell awkwardly, the candlestick she'd been raising above her head sent skidding across the floor, clanging on the child's cage. The girl jumped but made no sound.

Jenny was gone and I didn't care where to. Shaking myself, half-blind from plaster dust and sweat, I scrambled toward the exit.

Her door, the one I had rapped on so many times, the one that I had never gained entry to, slammed hard in its jamb with me outside. With this physical barrier between me and the horror, I rested. My hand was slick against the handle and I rested my head on the wood for a moment to collect myself. Through the delirium of fear and onslaught of gruesome imagery, a single thought pierced. As if trying to maintain some semblance of normality, my brain said:

This would make a good story.

The door wrenched from my hand and I almost fell back across the threshold.

Jenny stood in the doorway.

The thin blade looked so comfortable in her hand. Yet she held it away from her side as if reluctant to acknowledge its existence.

"Please," she said again. "Don't run. She's just sick, that's all. I'm just trying to make her better."

I ran.

Fumbling down the stairs, my head wanting to travel faster than my feet.

Never has my mind been so focussed as when fleeing from that mortal danger. I raced out of my building, across the tarmac and down the empty road to the busier streets beyond. The world blurred as I sped

through it. I don't remember steering my body in any particular direction. All I knew was that I had to escape.

Sitting almost casually on the bench in Haggerston Park, my body shuddered with exertion. I wept, I think, and thankfully no one stopped to ask me why. I would have lost my mind right there in the park if I'd had to recount what I had seen. I made my way to a police station, said only that there had been a murder and gave them the address. I wouldn't speak another word until they returned and I sat feeling utterly vulnerable in the cells for almost three hours.

THE AUTHORITIES FOUND nothing of Jenny or her daughter. Every item they owned had been left behind, as had the staring corpse. They blamed me at first, of course. The cage was gone and only when they found chains beneath the girl's bed did they begin to believe that she had existed at all. As evidence of Jenny's other victims was unearthed outside the building or stowed away in her apartment, I was slowly absolved.

After months of counselling and living in a hotel in Richmond, I returned to my apartment. They said it would be cathartic to face the scene. Still, I remained downstairs and wouldn't even cast my eyes upward to the place where I had laughed on the landing with my pretty neighbour. I feared that Jenny would be stood there, the girl peering from behind her leg like an ordinary child but with the eyes of a psychopath, despite what my common sense told me. If anything has come

of this, I now know that common sense doesn't serve so well when faced with the uncommon. It had told me the woman who lived above me was telling the truth, that the noises from her apartment were innocent and not made by her victims in the throes of death. Common sense had lied to me, and our relationship ended messily.

I lived there for another three months in relative peace, if only to prove to myself that I could. No sounds filtered from above and I was comfortable in the silence. Only rarely did I think about the apartment, or about Jenny's blood-splattered hands, or of the gnawing sounds her daughter had made.

Then came the day for the new tenants to move in. As I understood it, they hadn't been told of the events upstairs. The whole thing had been kept relatively quiet when the police realised they would probably never find Jenny. I knew they were coming; the same estate agent who had sold me the apartment came to let me know.

I waited.

The pressure built inside me like a steam engine with no valve. I was driven to distraction. Pacing the floors, almost scratching at the walls, I waited.

They arrived with trucks full of furniture and cases full of clothes. I heard their voices, the squeak hinge of the door, and with the first *scree* of ill-fitting floorboards, I was gone.