

## *Night Terror*

**Mairi Neil** (*flash fiction under 750 words*)

Tim recognised the scraping noise as Grandfather's chair on the slate floor. Why is he in the kitchen now? The clock in the hallway ticked, whirred, and chimed the half-hour. Tim checked his Father's fob watch on the bedside table: 3.30am.

How did Grandfather manage the stairs by himself – and why? Is Mum downstairs too? Tim held his breath, but no tell-tale cough announced his mother's presence; no whistle of steam from the kettle on the range. When Mum's in the kitchen, there's always the clink of cups, although this is a strange hour for a tea party.

Another creak, low and sinister, followed by the scraping noise again.

Tim imagined the chair rocking back and forth in front of the wood-fired stove. The old man huddling forward, gnarled hands stretching towards the open oven door, willing the radiated heat to warm arthritic bones. Mum must be there, who else stoked and lit the fire? Tim concentrated; listened for murmuring voices.

The morning ritual always the same; Grandfather with his crook legs and weak heart only managed downstairs by leaning on someone's arm and gripping the bannister.

Maybe they couldn't sleep and Mum lit the fire to keep the old man company and now they're absorbed in one of the story-telling sessions they seem to like so much. Always talking about the past and often Tim wished he had a time machine like the man in the book he borrowed from the library.

He burrowed deeper into warm bedclothes, his small face, a flat white stone in an inky river of shadows. His breath drifted in uneven puffs in the cold air and twitching his nose his eyes widened with remembering. If Grandfather is rocking in front of the fire he'd be smoking his pipe, a habit he said helped him count his blessings. But no pungent tobacco smoke wafted up the staircase to cloud the room. An asthmatic cough from the room across the hall punctuated the night before fading into gentle snoring almost immediately.

Mum is still asleep. Who is downstairs? A thief? Tim shuddered.

So many homeless men living by the railway line. Men who cadged meals and money before stowing away on one of the frequent goods trains that crisscrossed the land. Desperate men with nothing to lose. Men fighting to survive bad economic times.

Has one broken in and settled by the fire? Tim's eyelids flickered and he fought back tears. His troubled blue eyes stared at the dresser, found the photograph of his father, pale in the muted moonlight shining through threadbare curtains. If only the mining accident hadn't happened... Dad would make the intruder leave. Tim clenched his teeth.

He remembered the burly man at the door yesterday. The man offered to chop wood for two shillings – the price of a flagon of sherry. Mum confessed their poverty and offered a sandwich. The man's hairy top lip twisted. 'Only if there's dessert,' he said, menacing eyes staring too long at Mum's chest before returning to her flushed face.

Tim sensed his Mother's fear as she slammed the door, rammed the bolt across, pressed her shaking body against the entrance as if the oak panels needed help to keep the man out.

His ten-year-old hands fisted, but Grandfather's restraining hand on his shoulder held him firm. He hated the old man for his whispered, 'You're too young, boy,' but had a rush of pity when Grandfather added, 'and I'm too old.'

Blood surged in Tim's ears. He gripped the bedsheets, his racing heartbeat competing with the scraping and rumbling below. He must go downstairs and face the intruder, prove to Grandfather he was not too young, prove to Mum he could protect her.

The curtains billowed and a gust of even colder air swirled around the room. Tim froze. Perhaps it was a ghost downstairs. Dad or Grandmother visiting – they both had favoured the chair by the fire. The scraping noise now accompanied by a rustling as if hands searched canisters. An almighty crash followed the rattling dishes. Tim covered under the blankets until a shattering of glass and china was joined by grunting and snarling.

He heard his Mum splutter, 'Damn possums!'

Tim searched for his slippers and met his mother in the hallway as she recovered from a coughing fit. They hurried downstairs. A tremulous smile playing on Tim's lips as the stairs creaked and Grandfather's chair scraped on the slate floor.

