

Monster under the bed

A short story by Lezanne Clannachan

Monster under the bed

Eddie pulls up his hood and rests his head on the back of the bench. Above him, the glass ceiling of Waterloo station soars away. The space makes him dizzy. Feels like he's inside a giant hot-air balloon flying close to the sun.

Something hits his lap. Lifting his head, he comes face to face with a panting dog, its front paws pattering about on his legs.

'Hey boy.' The dog licks his wrists as he rubs its ears. It's a mongrel. Looks a little like his Beanie. Its owner is carrying a stained, green sleeping bag over one shoulder. His boots are stuffed with bits of newspaper like birds' nests.

Some of his classmates would probably have given the man a hard time, shouted a bit of abuse. They don't like what they don't know. But Eddie's sick of what he knows. He asks 'What's your dog's name?'

The man ignores him, pulling on the dog's leash. 'Get down, you daft bugger.'

'I don't mind.' Eddie sits forward to stroke the dog which jumps back on his lap. He hugs it, his face in its fur. It even smells like Beanie after she's been fetching sticks from the river.

'Get off my dog,' the man says. He won't meet Eddie's eye but his face is all creased up with anger. 'You leave my dog alone.'

Eddie pushes the dog gently from his lap. The man yanks it to his side so hard it whimpers and Eddie feels bad. He wants to call after the man, saying he didn't mean any harm. He misses his own dog, that's all.

Leaning back again, Eddie puts a hand on the white box by his side. Just checking it's there. His stomach rumbles and he can't resist opening the lid. Hot sugar and raisins. Six Eccles cakes that cost him almost twenty quid. Closing the lid, he frets again about the bakery logo – Hampstead Baker's House. It's not the place his mother talks about from her childhood. That one no longer exists. He wasted hours looking for it. Now he'll be late home.

'May I?' A woman stops by his bench.

He puts the box on his lap; pushes his hood off his head.

She smiles as she sits down. 'This is my bench, you know.'

'Didn't see your name on it,' Eddie says.

She laughs at his bad joke, the light catching a diamond piercing above her lip. She's wearing a lot of make-up. Trying to look younger than she is. Like his mum, who is so careful with her make-up every morning. What's the point? he thinks when he's feeling mean.

'This one yours?' She asks as a train slides into the platform.

He shakes his head, having memorised the timetable last night. Not many trains stop at Frenley. Closing his eyes, he listens to the footfall of passengers, like an avalanche of rocks down a mountain. It's the noise he hadn't been prepared for – traffic, sirens, roadworks and underneath it, the great roar of the city itself.

'Been to college?'

‘Shopping. First time in London.’ Despite weeks of planning and pleading with his mum – Just pretend I’m at school – he’d woken up nervous. That’s when he realised how easy it could be to close your front door and never leave.

‘I’m Angie, by the way.’

‘Eddie.’ He shakes her hand with a firm grip to show strength of character. It’s manners not money that matter his mum liked to say when he was little.

The woman leans in, tapping the box. ‘What you got?’

‘Eccles cakes.’

‘My fave.’

‘My mum’s too. It’s her birthday present.’ The word ‘mum’ makes an anxious bubble in his stomach. The platform clock tells him he’s missed her tea. He pictures her on the edge of the sofa, nervous as a bird, wanting to go into the kitchen to make toast but unable to. ‘I should be home by now.’

‘Strict is she, your mum?’

Eddie shakes his head. ‘She’s not well. She needs me.’

‘It’s nice to be needed. My two only want me for wiping bums and making lunch boxes.’

‘You don’t look like a mum.’

She laughs. ‘Nicest thing anyone has said to me all day. All week.’ Resting her arm on the back of the bench, she tilts her head against her hand. ‘So, what about you? Do you have a girlfriend?’

Eddie’s face gets hot.

‘Made you blush,’ the woman says. She thinks it’s shyness but she’s wrong. It’s anger and it catches him off guard. He makes himself remember the grateful look on his mum’s face when he fetches her rug, brushes her hair, rubs her feet. What would I do without you, my boy? His anger shames him.

‘Plenty of time for all that.’ Angie taps her feet on the floor. ‘Bloody train’s always late.’

Eddie looks up. It’s starting to get dark. The evening sky pushes the glass ceiling towards him, the vast hangar space no longer taking his breath away. He thinks about Beanie. And Lucy with her long, straight hair.

Angie doesn’t try to speak to him again as they wait for the train, but when it arrives she gives his knee a shake.

‘Aren’t you going to get on?’

‘I’ll get the next one.’ The anger sits on his chest like a fat, ugly toad. If he goes home feeling like this, it’ll ruin his mum’s birthday surprise. Angie looks like she has something to say; he pretends to watch a group of girls in short skirts and stupid-looking shoes until she turns away.

When the platform is empty once more, he straightens. Realises he’s crushed the neat edges of the pastry box. The train curves away with the tracks until he loses it in the dark.

What was he thinking, letting it go? His mum will have finished the flask of coffee and tuna sandwiches ages ago. Worse still, she’ll be peeking through the gaps in the curtains, wondering where he is. He can’t even call her. She got rid of the telephone years ago. He closes his eyes, holding the cakes.

Do you remember the monster under your bed? It's how his mum explained it to him once. You know it's not real but that doesn't stop the fear. Even now he remembers jumping from the chest of drawers onto his bed so the monster couldn't grab his ankles.

Footsteps along the quiet platform. He doesn't bother to open his eyes. What's there to be scared of? A mugger? An unfriendly man with a dog? So what. So what.

'The next train isn't for an hour.' Angie is standing with her hands crossed in front of her like a sorry child. 'Thought you might like some company.'

'What about your kids?'

At my folks. I usually do overtime on Thursdays.' She shrugs. 'No-one's interested in insurance at the moment.' When he doesn't answer, she takes a breath and says 'I got on the train. Found a window seat and all. Then I saw you sitting there, looking lost.'

'I'm not.' The anger's fading. He never meets new people, hardly sees those he knows. His world is shrinking. Perhaps his mum's illness is contagious after all.

'I felt bad for teasing you earlier.'

Eddie shrugs, opens the box and chooses a cake. Takes a huge bite, holding the pastries out to Angie.

'I shouldn't,' she says, taking one.

'How old are you?' he asks.

'Older than your big sister – if you have one – and younger than your mum. You?'

'Fifteen.' He finishes the cake in three bites, licks sugar crystals off his fingers.

'You look older,' she says.

'I know.'

Angie touches his arm as he takes another Eccles. 'What about your mum?'

'I had a girlfriend once,' he says through his mouthful. 'And a dog.'

She's sitting very still. Like adults do when they're scared of saying something that might make you shut up. 'Last Saturday my mum asked me take my dog to Blackdown – this massive forest close to where we live.'

Beanie leaping, wagging her tail as he looped the rope through her collar; thinking it was a game. Love you, Beanie.

'I tied her to a tree and walked away.' What he doesn't say is how long he crouched behind a bush listening to his dog calling for him. Biting his thumb knuckle so he wouldn't cry.

Angie frowns. 'Why would she make you do that?'

'She's scared of anything I might love more than her.' He feels bad about saying it, even though it's true.

'I don't get it.' She picks at the diamond above her lip. 'You could have said no.'

That's what they all say. Mac and the rest of the gang said the same thing when he stopped football practice. Even Lucy. After everything he told her.

‘Is that what happened to your girlfriend?’

‘Nah. We wanted to go to the cinema but Lucy didn’t fancy the bus because it was raining. She said Can’t you get your mum to give us a lift? She started saying dumb things like that.’

They sit in silence, neither of them moving as another train arrives. Angie says ‘The next one is the last.’

‘I know.’ After he bought the pastries, he’d walked and walked; just for the pleasure of one road leading to another. Home, with its drawn curtains and closed up smell seems far away.

‘What’s wrong with your mum?’

He answers because he’ll never see Angie again. ‘First she stopped going out with her mate Lilian. Then she wouldn’t visit the neighbours. For my eleventh birthday she promised to take me to the cinema. She stood for ages with the front door open. In the end she gave up and lay down on the sofa and I took Beanie for a walk. After that she couldn’t even go into the garden.’

‘And your dad?’

‘Got sick of looking after her.’

He doesn’t ask about Angie’s life though he supposes he should. He’s not sure what she wants. A lost puppy perhaps. He offers her the last pastry.

She looks worried, shaking her head. ‘You will get the next train, right?’

‘Of course.’ What if he doesn’t? He plays it out like a film in his head. Ticket barrier, neon concourse, London road. He’d walk. That’s what he’d do. Until his legs ached and his head was clear. The idea catches hold of him like a fever. Leaning over the arm of the bench, he vomits up his mum’s Eccles cakes.

‘Christ.’ Angie leaps up, hesitates, then fusses over him like a fly. ‘The thing is, Eddie, when I saw you sitting there, you looked just like my little brother.’

He wipes his mouth. ‘Good looking bloke, then.’

She doesn’t smile. ‘Bit taller than you, I’d say. It’s more a feeling I got when I saw you.’

All the girls feel that way, he wants to say because she’s looking so serious.

‘He ran away when he was about your age,’ Angie says.

Eddie pictures himself walking out of the station into the huge London night. ‘What happened to him?’

‘He came back a week later but he wasn’t really the same old Jamie.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s not like something bad happened.’ Angie plucks at her diamond stud again. ‘Turns out he’d been sleeping on a mate’s floor.’

‘But he came home.’ Eddie slides down to rest his head again. ‘Happy ending.’

‘He never properly came back. We spent all our time waiting for him to disappear again.’

They hear the last train approaching at the same time. Angie tries to pull him to his feet. ‘Home time.’

Eddie shrugs her off.

She presses the door button, rushes back to get him. 'What are you waiting for?'

'Have you noticed how scared everyone is?' Eddie says. 'Some homeless man thinks I'm going to take his dog. You're worried I won't get on the train. My mum's terrified of her own life.' And he, himself, maybe most of all; scared of becoming scared.

'I have to get on,' Angie keeps saying and finally she does.

When he was eight, he crawled under his bed, lay on the dusty carpet until he knew – felt it in his bones – there was no monster. If he doesn't come home, his mum will have to leave the house. Even if she only gets as far as the garden gate.

The doors close. He can see Angie by the window. She won't look at him. As the train gathers speed, his heart starts pumping as if he's running to catch it. He leaves the empty pastry box on the bench and walks – one step after another – towards the ticket barrier.