

Known Cruelty

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Kevin woke, screaming. It happened again. The nightmares.

They started a couple of years ago. He remembered because it was a week before his ninth birthday. It plagued him. He overheard his parents talking to the doctor — 'thrashing around … bruises … adolescence …'

He whimpered under his blanket and drank the grey room, his breathing laboured, skin trembled and eyes were glazed with tiredness. Sweat formed on his head and his crotch was wet. It was always wet, and he didn't understand why.

Vanessa, mother, burst into the room and switched the light on. Kevin recoiled. She paced up to him and took the trembling boy into his arms. "Shh. It's over now."

He burrowed his face against her comfortable cotton nightdress, between her soft and plump breasts. They felt warm and comfortable and helped drown the light. Kevin sniffed back phlegm and held back tears. "Why me?" he asked, her body making his voice mumble.

She cupped his head in both hands and lifted it up. They looked at each other and the light burned his eyes. "It's only a dream," she caressed, "and it's gone now." They embraced.

The dark figure, its whole body in shadow — fragments of what happened. The feel of hot breath. The shaming. It all felt so real, and he screwed up his eyes against the memory and tried to forget.

"I used to have nightmares when I was a girl," his mother said. "Everything I touched turned invisible. One night, I remember dreaming I touched my chest, and I was so upset because I thought nobody could see my breasts. Your grand-mama told me to dream it again, because she thought if I were to touch my invisible chest with my special invisible powers, they wouldn't be invisible any more."

Kevin mumbled, "Did it work?"

"Can you see them?"

He looked at her mounds. "Yes."

"Then it worked."

He smiled and pulled himself back to look at her. "So what do I do?"

"I don't know," she started, then had an idea. "Everybody knows the bogeyman hates light — it kills him." She frowned at her son for effect and asked, "You do know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, mum," Kevin said. "Course I do."

"Well, then. Next time the bogeyman comes, turn the light on. You have to be quick. He'll be so scared that he's going to die, he'll run away and will never come back because he'll know that you know his secret."

Kevin nodded.

Vanessa reached over to his bedside lamp and pressed the red button on the base. "See — it works. If it was on a longer cord, you could chase him with it." She turned it off and smiled.

Reluctantly, Kevin sank his head into the soft pillow. Vanessa tucked him in and kissed him on the head. "It's normal for you to have nightmares, sweetie. They'll stop in time." She smiled and stroked his fine brown hair. "And just remember, if it comes back, your father and I are in the next room, okay? Nothing will ever happen to you. I promise."

Kevin nodded.

"Well, you get a good night's sleep. Last day of school before the holidays tomorrow. You need your rest." She

tucked up the blanket around his neck and washed fine hairs away from his eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too, mum."

She smiled and stood then casually walked to his bedroom door. Before she left, she turned and blew him a kiss. He blew one back and rolled over onto his side. Vanessa turned off the light and shut the bedroom door and went back to her room.

Kevin felt safe enough to close his eyes. Sleep was around the corner, and his nerves were steadier. A light cloudy sensation started to drift over his brain as sleep dawned, and he started to dream.

It was two hours later when his father entered Kevin's room. Naked, he climbed into his son's bed again and started kissing him.