

Sinister Stories **The Darkness** by Jonie Marx

Jacob could hear the darkness in his cupboard humming.



It started on the Monday, after he had come back from Scouts and had fish and chips as a special

treat cos Mum had forgotten to get anything in. He'd gone to bed and lain in his room, which was lit a luminous green by his rocket lava lamp. He'd felt the chips churn round in his stomach like clothes in a washing machine. It was then that he'd noticed the noise coming from the corner.

The cupboard was really small, built into the side of the room and overhanging the stairs. He used it for keeping clothes and storing a few old toys and magazines that he couldn't bear to part with. Like his X-Wing fighter, which he'd been given by Dad and which one day would be worth a fortune, provided he kept the box in pristine condition. Not that he thought he'd ever be able to sell it. But it was nice to daydream about what he would do with the money if he ever got up the courage.

There was no light in the cupboard and the door didn't close properly, so there was always a sliver of darkness which he could see against the gleaming white of the door surround. But tonight there was a patch of black which seemed, somehow, darker than the rest. Not so much dark, as empty. Like there was nothing there at all. A void.

It made a deep, humming noise. It was so low, that Jacob almost



couldn't hear it – like it was on the very edge of his hearing range. But it was definitely there. There was no doubt about it.

Jacob didn't know what the darkness was, but staring at it made him uncomfortable. He tried to fix his mind back on to mushy peas and ketchup and cans of fizzy drink which he shouldn't have on a weeknight, really, but his eyes kept drifting back to that little piece of emptiness right on the edge of his vision. He turned over and tried to focus on his rocket lamp, but the feeling persisted. It was like the darkness was looking at him, somehow.

He did not like the feeling at all.

When he woke the next day, the first thing he looked for, once he had rubbed the sleep from his eyes, was the darkness in the cupboard. It was like it had stayed with him in his dreams, refusing to budge. But when he looked, there was nothing there. The humming had gone, too. He could see the sleeve of his blue hoody and the stack of magazines that mum had been on at him to throw out and the tennis racket which he had got in Year 6 when he was sure he was going to be the next Tim Henman, until he'd discovered he couldn't actually hit a ball at all and he had two left feet. But that was all. No darkness and no humming.

The next night, he went to bed early. Because of the late night last night, Mum said, although he suspected it was because she had Tony, the bloke she'd met at yoga, coming around for a 'little drink'. He pulled the duvet up to his chin and tried to focus on the comic he was reading by the light of the lamp and ignore the humming which was coming from the cupboard. Because he knew there was nothing there. Of course, there wasn't. It was just a cupboard.



But eventually, the temptation became too much and he did look and sure enough, there was nothing there. Only it was a large patch of Nothing, larger than last night, and he thought that maybe it was spilling onto the floor in front of the cupboard as well. It had definitely grown.

He considered going downstairs and telling his Mum but when he thought about it, he didn't know what he could say. Come upstairs and look at the big patch of nothing in my cupboard? And Mum would be irritated at being interrupted while Tony was there and Tony would smile that big, fake smile he had which was supposed to say hey, guy, I'm your best friend, but actually meant hey, guy, I am taking your mum away from you, and Jacob would get that odd, knotted feeling in the pit of his stomach like he wanted to punch someone or run a marathon or screw himself into a ball. So it was best to just leave it and turn over and try to pretend that the darkness wasn't there, even if he could feel it watching him.

He found it hard to get to sleep that night, and when he did finally drift off, the darkness lurked in his brain like a shadow.

He woke up the next morning, tired and grumpy. But the darkness had gone.

Joe came over for tea the next night and they played games for a bit and watched videos online 'til his mum confiscated the tablet and said they needed to do something other than watch a screen all night.

'You can do that on your own,' she tutted, pressing the button so the screen turned black, 'why don't you play something together, like you used to?'



This was the problem with his mum, thought Jacob, she didn't understand that now they were at High School they didn't do stupid things like playing. He looked at Joe, embarrassed, but Joe just shrugged and went over to the cupboard.

'Can I get the X-Wing out?'

It was years since they had taken it out of the box together and ordinarily, Jacob would have loved the chance to look it over, checking it was still in mint condition. They could even look it up on Joe's phone, to see how much it would fetch. But for some reason, tonight he didn't feel like it.

'Why don't we go downstairs?'

But Joe had his hand on the cupboard door; was pulling it open.

'Stop it!'

Jacob hadn't meant to shout. But Joe looked shocked and shrugged his shoulders before sloping off downstairs. He left soon after. But he hadn't opened the door. At least there was that.

That night, the darkness had spread to the foot of the bed. Jacob watched it, pitch black against the green glow of the rocket lamp. The humming was louder, too. Now it was like there was a cluster of bees lurking somewhere in the room. Only Jacob was pretty sure there wasn't.

'What's up with you?' asked his mum as she passed him the milk that morning. His eyes were blurry and he felt fuzzy in his head, like he couldn't shake the sleep out. He shrugged and poured some cereal into his bowl.

'Grumpy-chops,' said his mum, ruffling his hair. He felt a flash of irritation. Why did she always have to treat him like a baby? There was



no point trying to explain to her what was lurking in his room. She'd just say he was imagining it. And anyway, she was too caught up with work and Tony to care about stuff like that. He'd have to deal with it on his own.

That night, the darkness crept closer. He sat, watching the shadow-that-was-not-a-shadow creep over the floorboards. It was so slow, you couldn't see it moving. But when you looked out of the corner of your eye, then you nearly, so nearly saw it. It was like that game he used to play at parties when he was little – Grandmother's Footsteps. People had to creep up on you behind your back but if you turned and saw them moving they were out of the game. There was always someone who was quick and quiet enough to tap you on your back, though. And then you were out.

The darkness had moved to his feet.

Jacob looked and saw his toes were suffused with grey, like they were the feet of a statue. They felt cold, dead. He wiggled his foot and it moved slowly, like an old man's. It was a strange sensation – there was no pain, but it felt heavy and awkward. He imagined the darkness moving through his veins, turning his red blood a dull grey, making it sluggish and thick.

He sat there all night, by his lamp, watching the darkness creep slowly, slowly up his leg and listening to the dull hum as it invaded him. By the time the sun rose in the morning, his leg up to his knee was grey and cold. He wondered how long it would take to reach his heart.

He knew he should tell his mum – show her his stone-coloured shins. But he couldn't be bothered. It didn't seem to matter any more. Nothing



seemed to matter that much, to be honest. He thought about school and his mates and the X-wing fighter and his dad and none of it seemed important – none of it was worth worrying about. And when he thought of the darkness now, it wasn't as something scary, but just as something that was. It couldn't be changed. So there was no point fighting it really.

That night, he went to bed as usual. He lay for some minutes in the green glow of his rocket lamp, listening to the humming which now encircled him like hornets. And then, without even really thinking about what he was doing, he reached out and turned off his lamp.

Darkness.

