

Night Visitor

by Matt DeVirgiliis

It's nine o'clock on Sunday night and time for bed. So, Mrs. D. tucks in her youngest son, John.

"Sleep tight, Johnny. You have school tomorrow. Get some rest."

"Night, Mom."

She flicks off the light and closes the door. The streetlights' glimmer enters the second story windows of their South Philadelphia row-home. Johnny watches shadows bounce around the walls. They dance in unison with the shaking trees outside. He listens to the moans and creaks of the house. They're nothing new. It's an old house, and he's gotten used to the once frightening sounds. At 8 years old, he's seen it all and is afraid of nothing. Squeezing his stuffed stegosaurus, he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep.

A door slams.

Johnny's eyes pop open. He tries to focus in the dark room. He glances at his Mickey alarm clock: 3am.

"Mom?"

He lies still and silent. "That was the front door," he thinks. But his thoughts are interrupted by heavy footsteps. Johnny listens. Clip clop. Clip clop.

The tapping of hard soles moves slowly but forcefully away from the front door and toward the kitchen. Johnny looks at his dinosaur as if its spiked tail and plates of armor will protect him. Clip clop. Clip clop. The footsteps circle the kitchen. The back door creaks open and whines closed again.

Now there's a man's voice. Johnny stays quiet. "Where is the broom? I told you to clean up that mess," says the voice.

"Dad?" Johnny strains to whisper. "Dad, is that you?"

"Where did you put my broom, kid?" says the voice.

"Jack, calm down. He'll find it."

"Stay out of this, Helen. Kid, the broom?"

Johnny yanks the covers up over his mouth and nose, barely leaving his eyes free to watch his door. "Hello?"

The voice goes quiet, but the footsteps move once more. Clip clop. Johnny listens as the footsteps cover the first floor. They move from the kitchen into the dining room and through to the living room. They clip clop toward the cellar door over to the coat closet and back into the living room. They stop at the foot of the stairs. It is quiet.

Johnny tries his best to keep silent, but his heart is pumping and his lungs can't get enough air. "Where did he go? What's he doing now?"

A floorboard squeaks under pressure. It's the first step. Johnny knows that sound better than any other. Normally, it's his cue that Mom and Dad are coming to bed and that he should put his army men away and pretend to be sleeping.

Nothing. Johnny hears the dull sound of a car engine passing in the distance. Branches from the tree out front scratch at his window. All of the sounds he doesn't want to hear flood his ears and distract him from the one sound that matters.

Clip clop.

The person has moved up, just one step, but up and closer to his room. Johnny waits.

Clip clop. Clip clop.

The footsteps move up another step. And another. "How many steps are there? Twelve? Eleven? Fourteen?" Johnny tries to count in his head.

Clip clop.

Another step closer.

Clip clop.

Clip clop.

They have to be halfway up.

Clip clop clip clop clip clop.

Johnny pulls the last of the blankets over his head and closes his eyes, even though he can't see through the sheets. He tightens his grip on stegosaurus, threatening its seams.

The footsteps get closer and closer. Johnny's breaths are quick, but useless. He waits for the inevitable.

Clip clop clip clop. It stops.

Johnny pulls his knees into his chest and does his best armadillo. He listens for his door to open. "Is he standing outside my door? What is he waiting for? Come in. Get it over with."

Nothing.

Johnny sits up, still under the covers. His doorknob creaks and spins. Johnny waits.

"Mom, help."

