

Flood
Elly Strigner 2012

It was a house for giants.

We moved there when I was a toddler, and because it stood next door to the church, we called it the Vicarage. It overlooked the main road of a tiny Welsh village, partially hidden behind a web of brambles, and the wild garden with its rusty climbing frame. The front door was thick enough to be split in two; only its stained glass panels showed any frailty, with faded yellow strips of sellotape covering up a few cracks. Cobwebs whispered in the ceiling borders and the edges of lightbulbs. Invisible mice danced between the rooms. Inside, the huge dark, heavy oak doors were so sturdy that once they had been clicked shut, my three-year old brother, Ben, and I couldn't open them on our own. But we could dangle off their wrought iron knobs, our feet inches above the floor, one of us on either side, without even causing a creak.

Our bedroom door was particularly sticky, and very difficult to open from the inside. Dad hadn't gotten around to fixing it yet and we weren't allowed to shut it. I lost a big toenail under it, once (my first proper injury). In a frenzied game of chase with the neighbours' kids, I had gleefully shut Chris, the oldest, out of my room, and was blowing raspberries at him from inside. Confident he wouldn't be able to open the door, I had leaned right up against it, toes pressed up to the threshold, forgetting that he was three years older than me, a strong eight year old who already worked with his hands, who built tree houses with his big cousins and helped to hold down sheep for shearing in his Dad's field...why would it even occur to me? Then the door had spluttered open with my toe still firmly beneath it, and there had been lots and lots of blood....

The house was always bright in the daytime. Time would pass quickly, as Ben and I chased each other from room to room, or went ceaselessly up and down, up and down the stairs, crawling like cats on our hands and knees. But the dark corners opened up at night, and corridors stretched out like long pauses. Our only game then was to get up the stairs as fast as we could, like ants under a glass, away from things we could not see. Things that tried to hook cold fingers through our spines, and pull us back down into the dark hallway below.

Every other house we knew seemed tiny by comparison. Across the road, snug, with flimsy doors and only one bedroom, was Gran's cottage. It was barely a minute away but Gran preferred to stay at home, rarely visited us and if she did, she insisted on using the car. Granddad's bungalow was a couple of hours drive away, by the sea in Towyn, and didn't even have stairs. He did have an old caravan on stilts in the back garden, though. It was surrounded by sandbags, and customized with oak veneer panels and porthole windows, so it looked like a strange boat. We weren't allowed inside it, but if we visited Granddad on a windy day, and were refused a walk out onto the sea wall, Ben and I would drag the bags from their spot and make a fort near its entrance. We'd watch the grown-ups drinking their tea through the patio doors, and insist on staying outside to

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protect the house (though from what we couldn't really say) waiting for them to lure us back with chocolate biscuits.

Granddad liked to tell us that he was really a pirate, but Mum's face told a different story. She said that he couldn't even swim. So I didn't know who was telling the truth, because Granddad always wore a gold hoop though his left ear, but whoever heard of a pirate that couldn't swim?

Our bathtub at home was the size of a boat. At least, it was to Ben and I. Dad was always in charge of bath times because he was the only person who could get the bubbles right. With his tremendous arms he would swirl the water into a torrent, creating great meringues and drifting peaks in the foam. He tried to show me how to do it, but my arms were too puny, and frothing the water that quickly only made my tummy turn upside down, and send me tumbling head-first into the basin.

We loved our baths for these bubbles. I made them into the shape of a big white gown or an Eskimo's hood, or a sea-monster, or I just covered myself with soapy chicken pox spots. Or we would build another fort, and protect the bathroom.

But tonight Mum and Dad were going out, so Janet, the babysitter, would be taking charge of the bath. Janet was always kind, but she was very sober and her hair was bristly and disturbingly neat, like a grey, groomed hedgehog snoozing on her head. She was gradually going deaf and wore itchy looking, hand-knitted brown jumpers; not like Mum, who looked very pretty tonight in an electric blue dress, and had hair like a cloud, and when she kissed us goodbye, she smelled of perfume and talcum powder.

Janet made fish fingers, chips and beans for tea. She let us have second helpings, and even served ice cream for afterwards – something that our parents did very rarely, only on special occasions. So it was clear to Ben and I that Janet knew a lot more about food than they did. When it came to baths, however, she had no idea.

I watched, helplessly, as she filled the tub just a few inches deep, turned the taps off, and then poured the bubble bath in at the very end – something you should never do! Even Ben knew you had to pour the bubbles under the tap, while the water was still running. That's how you got so much foam. I tried to explain to Janet about the frothing, but she didn't hear properly, just shook her head and tutted as she helped Ben with his clothes, then picked me up and plonked me in the tub.

What a rubbish bath. It was so disappointing – it barely came up to my waist. It was like sitting in a puddle. Ben was perfectly happy, deeply involved in a game with a plastic aeroplane and a rubber duck, but where were the dressing up bubbles? I made a hat with a sponge instead and sulked a bit, and then it was time to get out.

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We were put into bed but I couldn't sleep. My brother was already flat out in his bed on the other side of the room, peaceful and cherubic. But I was restless. I turned on my bedside frog-lamp and opened up the box full of dressing-up clothes, and rifled through the scraps of mis-matched fabric for a while. I dug my hands deep into a mound of tulle and lace, picturing a nest of foam. Our door was always left ajar at night, and I could hear Janet downstairs rustling around, turning on the T.V, and the opening theme tune for Eastenders. I heard the boil and click of the kettle, Janet's slow shuffle towards the living room, and before I could hold it in an idea escaped into the room.

I peeped my head around the door and glanced along the shadowy corridor. The bathroom was at the other end. Darkness, save for the faint downstairs glow rising through the banisters, filled the space in between.

I couldn't reach the cord for the bathroom light, but a full moon was seeping through the uncovered window and into the carpet. Cobwebs of light skimmed over every surface, and the tub reverberated silver and blue. My ship waited.

I turned the taps on, but the sound of the water gushing out was as loud as a marching band. I couldn't be sure that Janet, despite her deafness, wouldn't hear, so with awkward fingers I turned them down to a barely audible trickle. Then I leaned over the edge to find the big, purple, plastic bottle of liquid that let out all the magic, and proceeded to empty the entire contents, as carefully as I could, under the slowly running stream. I flexed my fingers under it like a beaded curtain, making shapes and enjoying the warm, silky wash. The bubbles didn't seem to need any encouragement, but the tub was filling up too slowly, so I decided to go and sit at the top of the stairs to keep watch incase Janet came up to check on us. I rested my head against the banister. From my spot, I could hear the bath running, and the hypnotic sound it made; the echo of the water on its way down, hitting the tub with a deep wobble. My eyes draped themselves shut.

I don't know how long I had drifted off for when they snapped back open. An abrupt silence stood out against the constant trickling coming from the bathroom, prodding me back into the moment. A shuffling noise. Was somebody else on the stairs? It was too dark to see.

I didn't know what the consequences would be if Janet found me out of bed, but I was six and any telling-off seemed very, very bad. It dawned on me that I was alone, in the dark corridor, with nothing but blackness beneath. Anything could be down there. Was the sound at the foot of the stairs, or was it closer? Was there a sound at all? Now it seemed to have stopped, but I thought I could feel it waiting.

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I hardly dared move, but I had to see. I turned my head towards the bathroom. I don't know what I was expecting. A huge puddle, perhaps. But all that was ahead of me was shapeless and black; edges of things that I couldn't make out rose up in shadowy peaks, and the weight of the air became heavy.

I tensed, twitching like a rabbit, then bolted, scrambling through the nearest open door and shutting it as hard as I could.

Squatting on my heels, I pressed my ear up against it from the inside, trying to catch my breath so I could listen out for the thing in the hall. But all I could hear was the distant sound of water, and then I realized that I was back in the bedroom, and I had shut the door.

I wrenched and wrenched at the handle with my small hands. Chris would be able to open it, I thought desperately. But Chris was not here, the bath was still running, Janet was downstairs, and she hadn't heard anything, and I was sort of relieved about that but not at all, really, and maybe Mum and Dad wouldn't be back for ages, oh and when they got back, then I'd be for it, and by then probably the whole house would fill up with water, and maybe we'd all have drowned, and anyway there was something out there, in the hallway...and at that point I started to cry very, very hard and my brother didn't even stir.

A few moments later, I felt the deep vibration of the front door as it opened and shut, and heard new voices downstairs. My panic wavered a little, as I strained to hear Mum's voice, low and soft, and the deep, serious boom I knew was my Dad; Janet just made warbling sounds, like a plump chicken.

Then came a pause, and a long silence. Why had they stopped talking? All I could hear now was the blood pumping in my ears. The soft trickling was still there, distant but audible through the door, like a waterfall. It seemed so loud. And then came the unmistakable sound of Dad's heavy footsteps ascending the stairs. This was it, it was all over, and I was going to get found out. There was nothing else for it – I had to take action. So, doing what I knew best, I flung myself under the bed, and screwed my eyes tight shut, covering my face and then my ears with my hands.

The next morning, at the kitchen table, I mashed my porridge into a soggy paste while Ben sang happily about his toast. I had little appetite, and was pale and teary eyed. But I was at least relieved to find that I was still in one piece, and had not caused a flood after all.

Dad had reached the taps just as the water reached the lip of the bath, beginning to swell over the edge and onto the carpet. The house was intact. And after saving us all

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from drowning, he had opened my bedroom door effortlessly, and found me cowering in my hiding place. I was bracing myself for a smack, but he didn't do it. He just left me sobbing guiltily until I passed out into an exhausted sleep.

I traced my spoon around patches of sunlight on the tablecloth. The kettle was boiling; Mum was busy fiddling with the radio, and I could see Dad in the garden, weeding the vegetable patch. Mum found the station she wanted, and set up the ironing board. We sang along to 'Love Shack'; Ben and I laughed at Mum wiggling her hips and waving a pillowcase around; but then the news came on, and she put her fingers to her lips for quiet. I grinned, and swallowed a mouthful of porridge. Everything seemed better in the daytime. I pulled faces at Ben across the table, making him giggle again.

Quiet! Mum said, suddenly. She had stopped ironing, and was staring at the radio as though it was a wild animal. We stopped laughing.

The flat, clipped words of the newsreader were mostly gibberish, but a few made perfect sense, and when I heard the man say *flooded*, the porridge turned into a cold, hard lump in my throat.

Slowly, Mum put down the iron, unplugged it, and disappeared into the garden. I watched my parents talking through the window. I desperately wanted to follow, but somehow I felt as though I should not move. Dad's head was down, listening. Mum talked quickly, in a voice higher than usual, her words trickling through the glass.

A moment later the phone rang. Usually I would be falling over myself to get to it, but I still could not move. Mum got to it first and I immediately knew it was Granddad; she always called him by his first name, Bill.

Her voice became more agitated. My spoon hovered over the bowl. I watched little worry lines forming on her forehead.

What's happened? Where are you?

She was twisting the cord around her fingers.

The whole estate? The whole WALL?

Round and round they twirled. I couldn't stop watching.

Not the caravan as well? All right, we're going to come over. What do you mean, we can't...No Dad! We're coming.

I flickered with delight at the thought of going to see Granddad, but then I felt sick. If she called him 'Dad', it meant that serious things were happening.

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She hung up and sat down at the table, scooping Ben up into her lap. He sat there peacefully, licking honey and crumbs from his fingers. I wished I could be him, then.

Beth, she said, I'm going to take you and Ben to Gran's house after breakfast. She was trying to make it sound fun, even though she knew it wasn't as fun as going to see Granddad, and she knew I had guessed. I heard Dad shuffling around, taking off his boots in the back porch.

Your Dad and I need to go and see Granddad by ourselves today.

But Dad had turned the taps off, I thought, as an image of a huge black tidal wave passed in front of my eyes, Granddad's caravan bobbing along the crest. I put my spoon down and my bottom lip trembled. I had to come with them. I was the only one who knew how to build a proper fort!

Beth! Are you listening to me? It's not safe for you to come.

Mum bounced Ben on her knee and reached over to touch my hair, but I flinched. Then Dad came in, not looking at anybody, and I turned my face to the floor, letting the tears splash down onto my lap.

We saw it on the TV, after Mum and Dad left us at Gran's house. I felt safer there, and it was pleasing to be in the cluttered living room, surrounded by cushions and mismatched furniture. Curled up on the sofa, Ben rested his head against my shoulder and clutched a soft toy, while Gran offered us juice and biscuits. But my stomach was still flipping over with guilt and I had no appetite, even when she tried me with the pink wafers.

She made a cup of tea and lit a cigarette, and sat back down in her armchair. She always sat down when she smoked. Together we avidly watched the footage of giant waves crashing against the now shattered sea wall, emerging like a great claw over the top of the fairground rides.

I peered closely at the screen, straining not to blink, for a shot of Granddad's caravan. But I couldn't see it anywhere. Doors hung off their handles, and cars bobbed up and down on murky waters; people were moved from their houses in little boats, grannies were lifted onto the shoulders of strong men. We squealed with delight at a shot of a fireman striding through the waist-high waters, carrying a big, happy looking dog in his arms.

Then came an interior of someone's house. The camera panned from room to room, through the tiny hallway, where rippling waters licked at a fish tank; into a bedroom full of drifting shirts and boxes; and finally the bathroom. Words in bold letters and block colours scrolled across the bottom of the screen. The voice of the reporter, with his flat,

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Welsh vowels, murmured over the top. Nothing looked familiar. I could see the top of the sink and toilet, brass-coloured taps twinkling out from under the water, and a rubber duck making its way casually from one side of the room to the next. I laughed and pointed it out to Gran, who gave a little smile, then carried on watching.

The lady whose house it belonged to was being interviewed. She was an old lady, like Gran, with white curly hair and big spectacles. She was sitting in a wheelchair, in what looked like a village hall with lots of other people, all of them old. A little dog sat in her lap, and although she spoke to the reporter cheerfully, and very fast, her eyes and her mouth gave her away. A deep sadness drifted out of the TV set and into the room.

I woke up in the night, she was saying, I thought I'd left the bath running at first. And I've only just fitted a new bathroom. You know, with a seat in the tub, because I can't get in on my own any more. The reporter asked her how she felt, when she realized what was happening. *Very scared, she said, Scared for me dog. But you know, she said, cutting across, as the reporter began asking another question, it's not just my house, it's everyone's. All that damage,* She shook her head, as the microphone floated near her face. *To think, I thought it were me!* She laughed, but still sounded sad. *I thought it were just me.*

I thought about Granddad as I looked at more pictures on the TV. I wondered if his caravan turned into a real boat. A fort probably wouldn't have done any good. Gran flicked the channel over, stubbing out her cigarette in the crystal ashtray at her side, and stood up to retrieve the biscuit tin.

Go on, my love, she said, gently shaking it at me. Ben had fallen asleep on my shoulder, thumb lodged firmly in his mouth, a thread of drool slipping down onto my jumper. She stroked my hair.

It's lucky Granddad used to be a pirate, isn't it? Eh? She shook the tin again, smiling at me. I hesitated.

Go on, she said. *Go on, I know you didn't finish your breakfast.* My stomach gurgled then, and I felt it settle down; so I smiled back, reached for the tin, and took three.