

No. 1

Tales from the Hood

By Emma Pollard

The tube carriage judders. There, opposite, I see him watching me, his eyes bloodshot and sunken. His face is young, but his hair and half grown beard are infested with grey. He grins at me. The lights flicker on and off. He's beside me.

"Going to a party, eh?" he whispers, head cocked. The smell of stale tobacco hits me, invading the only personal space I had left. He smiles, showing yellow teeth and prominent canines, while his long nailed fingers move over the cake box in my lap. I bat his hand away and look around desperately. There, two men in suits - they're averting their eyes. Typical.

It doesn't matter, I'm almost there.

I sit in silence, my head turned away from his rank stench, and from those manic eyes that are desperately trying to catch me.

The train whines and breaks, the darkness of the tunnel is replaced by light, then the carriage shudders to a halt and the doors open to reveal my escape route. I wait. I've seen it in the movies. Just as the beeps sound I rush out of the carriage onto the empty platform.

I hurry to the stairs, a fast walk, not a jog just yet. I hear taps on the steps behind me. They're quick, gaining on me. I can't go fast enough up the steps; too scared to fall, and too afraid to look back.

Out in the corridor, I break into a run towards the orange high-vis jacket patrolling the ticket barrier, "There's a man," my voice shudders like the tube carriage, "He's following me!"

The attendant peers behind me, "No one there, love." He gives me a look that pats me on the head, "Don't you worry."

I curse and fumble in my pocket for my crumpled ticket, slide it in, and the barriers open with a hum of relief. The attendant shakes his head.

At the bus stop the icy night tries to crawl underneath my clothes. After what feels like forever, the Hammersmith bus arrives and meanders round the streets of London, before dropping me near the old terraced street.

I can see even from where I stand that Nanna has lit a fire tonight; the orange tinted smoke whispers from her chimney stack. She doesn't know I'm coming - it's a surprise. I look down to the slightly crushed box.

As I move out of the shelter of the empty bus stop I get the sudden feeling that I'm too far away, even here, just a hundred metres from the house. There are too many paving slabs between me and the calm warmth of the front room. I quicken my pace, my trainers almost silent against the pavement. My fast pace becomes a run, then a sprint, causing the hood of my sweatshirt to blow back from my face.

I reach Nan's door and fumble in my handbag for the key. The crisp air hits me like a slap.

It's gone. Everything. It was all just a distraction, a stupid scam. My wallet, my phone. Everything. Gone.

I bang on the door. Then I realise that there's more - Nan's birthday card was in my handbag. That's gone too, and her address was on there. I hadn't posted it in time.

My heart jolts in my chest as I catch a movement to my left, by the stone wall only twenty metres away. Does he know where I am?

I become aware of the coldness of the step under my feet, the lack of anyone else visible in the neon darkness. I bang again, even harder this time.

"Who is it?" I hear the reply, far away in the back room, high pitched, panicky even.

"Nan, are you okay? It's Alisha."

"Alisha?" her voice is coarse.

"Please, Nanna. Hurry!"

The door opens quickly and I rush in as Nanna slams the door behind me.

I try to turn but I'm grasped from behind. The scent of tobacco hits my nose. The coarseness of a beard scratches gently at my cheek. Nanna's nowhere in sight.

A kitchen knife scratches at the soft part of my neck. I can just see the edge of it gleaming in the hall light.

“My, grandma, what a big blade you have,” he hisses.

“No!” I’m hoarse. I feel weak. “Nan? Where’s Nanna?”

He looks from my throat to the cake, which has been crushed into the carpet where my feet have struggled against him. “You know,” he whispers, “I can’t decide what to cut up next.” I can hear his wicked grin.

He inhales the smell of my hair, his mouth so close that I can feel the heat of his breath on my skin as he exhales, “Or perhaps the cutting will have to wait, eh?”

His dirty hand covers my mouth.

I can feel my heart beating frantically throughout my body, behind my eyes, into my ears, muting all the sounds around me. My legs shake so hard I can hardly stand.

I can’t let this happen.

I bite deep into his hand, driving my heel into his foot. I shove away at his arm and push him as hard as I can, and I don’t stop to look as I take the stairs, grabbing both banisters for support.

I’m almost at the top. A pause. Thud, thud. He’s on them too. He’s taking the steps two at a time.

I scabble into Nanna’s bedroom, slam the door and heave her white dresser across in front of it.

I stumble to the window, but it hits me that I don’t know where she keeps the key. With each thud of the door I see the dresser move further back.

Another thud so deep it runs through the carpet.

I hunt furiously in the porcelain box, through the stray earrings, the tangled thread, the pins that prick my fingers.

Thud.

I run my hand along the window ledge. My vision doesn’t work anymore. I feel behind the curtains. There.

Thud.

My hand is shaking so much that the key won't fit in the lock.
The dresser takes one final hit.

The key quivers in.

Time almost stands still as I pull myself through the window, scraping my arms and legs against the rough frame. I can barely feel the cold air now. I only feel my feet trying to slip from underneath me on the sloped glass roof of the conservatory. I ram the window behind me to close it.

As I turn away I hear the door bang against the wall inside and make the mistake of looking back. The eyes behind the pane meet mine. They're eager, hungry. I let my feet scuff and slide down the glass roof and jump to the ground. My ankle buckles under me with a snap and I can't help but cry out, at the same time desperately searching. The fences are so high. I realise I'm enclosed.

I try to move. It's too late. Metal flashes. I'm screaming.

* * *

"Alisha?" I hoped she might come tonight. She's a good girl.

My hand touches the cold metal of the door handle, but hovers for a moment. I take a peek through the eyepiece.

It's not Alisha. There's a man, ragged and young. Something about his confident, lithe frame fills me with dread.

I hear a key turning in the lock, and my heart begins to beat like a rabbit's.

I move to the back room, through to the conservatory, feeling for the key in the darkened room. As I open the doors the cold air flows under my dress, taking my breath away. I slip outside, pushing the doors silently shut behind me. I know a place in the garden where I can hide, low down to the ground. The wet grass and brambles brush against my skin like insects.

I wait for what feels like an eternity.

My heart convulses in my chest as there's a commotion inside and I scramble to my knees. No! Alisha is here, in the bedroom, and he's following!

I feel with my hands for the woodpile, for the solid wood pole. I take it in both hands and rush back, through the glimmering shadows of the conservatory.

I hear sliding footsteps on the roof behind me, then the sound of feet hitting paving slabs with a dreadful crack of bone. I turn back. She's on the ground, but he's landed behind her, with a deep bend at his knees like a predator.

A flash of his knife. She's screaming. I swing the axe and he cries out in pain. I've taken his legs from underneath him and he falls to the ground.

I look frantically for my granddaughter. "Alisha?" I see her on the ground, dimly lit by the remaining light. Her eyes are filled with a primeval fear. At first I didn't see the blood camouflaged on her red sweatshirt, "Oh God, Alisha!"

He's still on the ground. His hand reaches out for something.

"Alisha, how bad is it?"

Tears run down her cheeks and she stares at her hands flecked with blood, "Not me." she says, "Not mine."

He's reaching for the knife. I feel his hands groping at my legs as I kick it away. It scuttles across the patio with what seems like an endless scrape. I brave a look at the ground, at the creature coiled on the floor, his forearms curled up against his chest and cursed with scars.

"Alisha, go inside. Call the police."

She crawls to her feet, and pulls the sweater's scarlet hood up for protection against the night.

The man on the floor sneers up at me with a sallow smile, teeth bared, and with eyes that glow with a wolfish hunger. He grins, "I will find her again."

I look up at the night sky, and swing the axe aloft, “Grandmas are a lot tougher than they used to be.”

The End