

Young Writers Award - 2007 winner

The Broom Closet by Joel Glazebrook

It's like this. Your baby is howling just as loud as the neverending stream of stinking roadtrains, and Jemimah's in the kitchen killing ants with a soup spoon, her dirty bare feet tensing as she applies force and laughs at the little popping sounds. The final bloodred smear of sunlight is sliding toward the horizon. With one palm on the dusty sill in the backroom you stare out the window into the terrifying dusk. Karen-Anne is in the front room bouncing on a bed and singing along to one of those surreal afternoon children's programs, about bananas and elephants being the best of friends. Alexis sits by your legs, reading from a book of love poetry you were given by someone long-forgotten.

- Mamma, who's *Cole-ridge*?

Your upper lip twitches. Nothing more comes.

The dry cool desert night is pouring in the window at you and despite the waxy mask of horror carved on your face, you stand to face it. Again and again and again and again

Alexis is no longer at your feet. You don't know where she is. You don't... you don't really care. Across the way the next trailer's lights come on and you see Mrs. Hannibal shuffling through the front room, phone to her ear, face animated with happiness. You think she is a poor old fool to be happy in this torn up world. It's not safe for you to feel like this. They shouldn't have let you out of hospital so soon.

You walk outside, and while standing in the dusty patch of land he left you to pay off all those years ago, a brief, vague hump of pride churns up into the top of your chest before being sucked back down into the pit of your gut by the darkness. You move your feet through the dust softly. It used to feel nice. It used to feel like home. But now: a prison. This dust. This metal shell. And this horde of children, each a spindly collation of tireless needs, each as foreign to you as the billions you've never met.

He comes up to you in the dark while you're gone with the night and touches the back of your neck. You don't even flinch.

- Hey girl, been waiting for you to come outside.

You mumble a greeting he takes for a sulk and his next words flop out defensive and cutting.

- Well, I'm sorry I couldn't come over this morning...but my wife's home with the cold and I had to take a run into town for some errands...it wouldn't be so bad if you didn't have all them kids, then I could come whenever.

- I just came out for the washin'. I didn't ever notice how big the moon was. It's real big.

- What you on about?

- Nothing.

You both look at the moon for a minute and you sigh. He is mad because he knows the place you're in and it means he's going to have to go back to his own trailer and try it with his wife and she with a cold is probably going to refuse him too.

He thinks about the new youngster in the old O'Brien place across the highway and wonders about her. He touches your neck again and you lull your head to the side. He moves forward and stands behind you and puts his head down and his mouth to your neck and the bristles of sandpaper shadow break invisible furrows in the surface of your skin and it feels like something at least.

- D'ja think that space is all empty, Trapper...like just nothing, you know?

- I don't know what you've been drinking but you're freaking me a little, babe. Why you got a think about space and such?

- I don't know. It's just there, so big, and I never thought about it for a long time. Like I'm thinking now, there's more space up there than there is ground down here so why don't we just both float up into it, like?

- You're a crazy pumpkin, honey.

He puts his hands around your waist. For a moment you think you can remember the way it feels to know completeness. But all the stinking facts of life won't let you hold the thought. The dark looks of his wife push through your mind and his hands on your belly don't feel so good anymore.

- I haven't even fed the kids yet

- Why you thinking about those kids?

- Trapper, will you still love me when the baby grows and my tits aren't so big and all?

- I don't love you now, sweetheart. I never said anything about love.

Your little word trick usually works. But Trapper's losing interest in you. He doesn't crave the look of your sharp face or the smell under your arms anymore. He doesn't crave the way your feet lock behind the small of his back or the warm feel of your breath on his chest and stomach. Trapper's moving on, like they all do, like they all will. But it doesn't make you hurt much more than usual. It is what it is.

You try to remember what's it's like to smile. You even try it out just to see, but it makes your cheeks hurt and your brow creases weirdly.

The traffic has thinned and you stand in Trapper's shadow, looking out from the edge of the trailer park into the long desert night. The cold is coming on fast as he reaches down and lifts the hem of your skirt. Hidden by your trailer, which stands at the perimeter, you let him do it. His hands are warm and the breeze is cool and the goosebumps rise on your legs and sides. You run your tongue over an ulcer that sits just inside your bottom lip and savour the sweet sting of it. You hear his zip and then he's in and you lean back at him, wrapping your left foot around behind his leg. It's almost enough to make you forget.

But then there's a commotion inside and the baby starts up, yamming it's high-frequency siren through the still night. Trapper pulls back and you step away from him and look at him with those eyes that say goodbye and he curses hard and walks off into the artificial glare of the trailer park quad. You bound the three stairs and slam the flyscreen half off its hinges as you lean forward back into the awful space. You think *that's it*.

In the kitchenette Alexis in on the floor mopping up a swampy stain of beans and Karen-Anne is patting the baby's soft cloud of wispy hair, calming her. You grab Alexis up, realising how much heavier she is, and bring your hand back only to whack it on the side of the table on route to her backside. The pain shoots up your arm and you curse like mad.

- I'm sorry Mamma, says Alexis, squiggling free of your grasp and bending back one of your finger nails doing so.

You slap her hard right across the face and she whimpers out a little yell, before falling to the floor and holding her face, looking up at you with tearful shining eyes. Jemimah starts to cry and the baby follows her, and Karen-Anne, leaving the baby crying, gets to the floor to start cleaning up the mess. You look at them all with wild eyes and don't say a word.

In the background the news is playing on the TV and that just makes you wilder, so you pick up the broom standing in the corner and you storm into the front room and start stabbing at the screen with the handle end. It does nothing. Just makes a thin glassy tink over and again. You waver on the verge of tears before a steely husk of determination enfolds your mind.

You turn the TV down to a low volume and then walk back to the kitchenette where you open the freezer and pull out a tray of vacuum-packed steakettes you were saving for Karen-Anne's birthday. You pop them in the microwave to defrost and then help Alexis and Karen-Anne clean the rest of the beans. Afterwards all three of you stand there silently, and you grab them in a big hug and tighten them up to your body.

- Alexis, baby, you fetch some carrots and start shaving `em, and Karen-Anne, you get me some potatoes and onions from the broom closet.

- Are you gunna make your honey carrots, mamma? asks Alexis and you nod without looking at her.

The microwave pings. The kitchen fills with the sweaty stench of quickly defrosted meat. Peeling back the wrapping you toss the squared, processed chunks into the sizzling pan. Alexis hands you the dish of carrots and you prepare them and place them on the top tray of the pre-heated oven. Your baby gurgles happily as Jemimah tries to teach her how to play Texas hold-em, which she learnt from Trapper.

You all say grace before the meal, and you lead the oft-neglected prayer, meaning each solemn word.

After the meal the girls are full and happy and you surprise them further by letting them each have a stick of Kit-Kat from your private stash. Alexis sucks away the chocolate and then crunches softly at the wafer. Karen-Anne peels the layer of chocolate away with her teeth. Jemimah wolfs the thing down, then looks at the other girls whilst they eat. You can't remember ever feeling so sad.

As you all sit around watching some show about New York police investigations - you can't tell if it's documentary or drama - you look at the girls and think of yourself at their age and a swath of relentless horror wears over you, the way a brutal sandstorm peels the skin back from a bovine carcass.

The girls laugh and joke and don't feel sleepy, hyped up by their lovely tea and after dinner treat. You go to the bathroom cabinet and then into the kitchenette to make them hot chocolate. They squeal with delight when you walk back through the draped beads with a tray of steaming mugs.

Soon they are motionless and you look at them each and sigh sort of. Somewhere off in the night an animal makes a noise. It's not a howl, but it still makes you shiver. You fetch the rope from the boot of the car and cut it into even lengths.

The hooks in the broom closet are high so you have to stand up on a wobbly creaking chair to thread the rope and belt through five of them. You look at the sixth hook and think what might have been. The last feller who lived here bolted them in to hang his tools. He made them strong and firm. There was no chance he'd let the hooks fail.

You drag Alexis into the kitchenette first because she will be the hardest. Even though she's only 5, you find it impossible to lift her up to the height needed, so you push the loop of rope around her neck and leverage her up. She doesn't stir a bit. Half way up your hand slips and Alexis comes slapping to the floor and you hear that something might've broke, but you just start hauling again.

When she's high enough you tie the rope off to the window bars, which are sturdy and won't give. You carry Karen-Anne in and do the same with her, and she's easier to lift up. Alexis face has gone a little purple and you can't tell if she's breathing.

When you try to carry Jemimah up onto the chair you tip off the chair and drop her, and she hits her head. You get down near her face and listen for her breath but there is none. Lowering to her chest you try to hear her heart. There's no sound. All you can hear is the buzz of the fluorescent light. You leave Jemimah on the floor and walk in to get the baby, which gurgles suspiciously at you. She isn't asleep because you couldn't give her any hot chocolate and she wouldn't take the bottle.

You carry her back into the kitchenette and tie her off up at the top of the broom closet. She kicks around, but the rope around her neck is too tight to let her cry. Liquid has pooled on the floor beneath Alexis and her face is a beautiful sheen of blue.

Walking outside into the dust you collapse into the ground and retch, strings of vomit flying out over the sand. You wipe your mouth and look out into the night and start to laugh a little. All the trailers across the park are silent. They are still, so perfectly formed against the barren landscape. You think about all the dreaming that is going on inside them about this time. You think about how the safety of the heavy bolted door and the barred windows let the people dream. That safe space gives them room to dream. You stopped dreaming so long ago. Your nights pass and you are always awake and always grey. It never changes or stops.

Suddenly there is a screeching wail followed by a sickening thud and you turn to see a cow flying apart up on the highway, having been wholly mashed by a passing road train, which quickly resumes its journey and in a minute is gone. The carnage appears to have come from nowhere. The grassy odour of shit hums along the bitter breeze. Not a soul in the trailer park stirs to life.

You return to the kitchenette and step onto the chair, passing the rope down your face, pulling it tight around your throat, so tight you can't swallow. And spit wells up in your mouth and dribbles, ebbing down from the corners of your lips and resting soft on your collar bones.

And before you kick the chair away you look at the kitchenette, the dishes stacked in the sink, the blackened pan on the stove-top, the little crumbs of chocolate on the table, the haphazardly gathered cards. All the signs of life and simple happiness, this is what you see. You look at it hard and try to find your own happiness, the feeling that used to get you up at 6 in the morning ready to face the world; the feeling that helped you ride over the ceaseless waves of childhood tragedy. But it's gone, to who knows where.

The tears come though, for the first time in months. They pour down your cheeks and release feels... it feels sublime.

You grab Alexis's hand, still almost warm, and kick off.