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RED SPIKES

MARGO LANAGAN

DEFINITIONS

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Baby Jane



'Well, at least it's a fine night,' said Mum.

She looked enormous, but that was mostly the bedding she'd gathered as she hurried out of the hut. Her hair, coming undone from its night-time tail, was a shock of silver on her shoulders.

'Though how we'll sleep with this moon I don't know. It's like the floodlights at the Cricket Ground. We need to find a place in the shade. Not under these gums, though – if they drop a branch, we're dead. Down by the creek there, among the casuarinas—'

A bellow interrupted her. Everyone looked up at the hut. Mum walked away down the hill, trailing a corner of the quilt across the moon-white grass. 'And a good distance from *that*.

That could go on for hours. Days. Come on, everyone, let's get settled.'

Dylan followed her slowly. She wasn't acting right. Anything to do with babies and births, Mum usually took over. She became queenly herself, moving differently, spreading a radiant peacefulness all around. She paused the world so the baby could land on it safely. Yet here she was, *walking away* from a woman in labour.

'I think we should get the *police*,' grumbled Ella, lumbering down the slope. She was pregnant, too; she was what Mum described as *about ready to drop*. 'It's outrageous. Whoever heard of it? Where did those people escape from – some kind of costume party?'

Todd gave an enormous yawn. 'Dunno what you're moaning about – you weren't asleep anyway. You *never sleep*, remember? 'S what you're always saying.'

'I *do* never sleep,' said Ella. 'Not these days. Or nights.'

The family moved down the slope ahead, in among the darker trees. They weren't nearly alarmed enough; that must be part of the magic. Dylan was panting, as if his body were trying to pump out the strong, wet-grass smell of bear and replace it with the proper bush smells of eucalypt and pine.

'Check for sleeping snakes,' Mum said when they reached the creek side, where the ground was flatter. 'Bang about a bit.'

So everyone stamped around in their pyjamas. It would have been funny if Dylan hadn't been so frightened. Weren't they *worried* about that bear? Weren't they *upset* about what had happened? It was eerie that they were positioning air mattresses

and spreading blankets and plumping pillows. Titch and Edwin were already asleep – look at them. They hadn't even cried. It was all a dream to them. Dylan pinched the inside of his elbow hard; he rubbed his arm roughly against a tree trunk; he breathed in and stared at the frills of white water along the creek, at the shadow people and the shadow trees, at the millions of stars above among the needly casuarina twigs. He smelled the smoke from the hut chimney. That funny man must be building up the fire. You needed boiling water when a baby was coming. What for? Dylan couldn't remember.

'Come on, Dylan. Come and settle down between Dad and me. We'll protect you against jibber-jabbers.' Her smile was the only part of her face that was moonlit.

'Jibber-jabbers,' said Dad dozily. 'That's going back a long way. What were those things, anyway, Dyl? You never told us properly; you were too scared even to talk about that nightmare.'

Dylan crawled up the valley between them, laid his head in the pillow cleft, and shuddered. 'They were these horrible creatures, hundreds of them, about up to my shoulders. They had big heads, big jaws, lots of teeth. *Jibbrah-jibbrah*, they said, *jibbrah-jibbrah-jibbrah-jibbrah*. They rushed at me out of the wardrobe and snapped their teeth.'

Dad snored gently.

'I still don't like to think about them,' Dylan said to Mum.

'Don't, then,' said Mum comfortably. 'I don't know where they came from in the first place – some movie? None of the others had such night terrors.' She closed her eyes with decision.

She always knew what to do. Dylan tried to be as firm about closing his.

They had rushed at him, jabbering, their eyes glowing yellow among the spines. And then a worse noise, a terrible rough growl, had stopped them, made them cringe, made them jabber quieter, at each other instead of at him. *Zing!* Someone had drawn a sword, over by the wardrobe.

Then a white flash, and a snap, and they'd gone, and Dylan was sitting up in bed staring at the wardrobe and yelling into the empty room.

Now, he buried himself deeper between Mum and Dad.

The creek rustled and chuckled and blipped.

Todd farted musically.

Ella said, 'To-odd!'

'What's your fuss? We're out in the open air, aren't we?'

Mum gave a little laugh through her nose, and Dylan let his giggle out.

'Shh, now.' Mum turned on her side so that her face was out of the moonlight.

Dylan followed the shadow line of her profile, from silver-fringed forehead along to soft under-chin and lace nightie collar. Nothing could seriously go wrong with the world while she hung there, could it? Or while Dad's back was all up and down his own?

He thought he heard a sound from the hut, through the creek noise. He tipped his head so that both ears were free to listen. His body had tensed; he tried to go floppy again.

'Still, Doug . . . ?' said Mum.

Dad made an unwilling sound.

'He's asleep,' whispered Dylan.

'Hmm.'

Dylan waited for her to speak again, but she didn't. 'What were you going to say to him?' he whispered.

'It is odd, isn't it?' she whispered.

'It's *very* odd. It's really, really, *really*—'

'I mean, who are they? How come we just let them— Where did they come from?'

Dylan lay there awhile. He breathed and she breathed, and when he thought, from her breath, that she was possibly asleep, he whispered, very quietly, 'I found them.'

She lifted her head. 'You found them?'

He nodded. The moon jiggled in the tree.

'When? On your walk this afternoon? Up on the mountain?'

He shook his head. 'When we were playing hidey. In among the rocks over there.' And he pointed above his head, across the creek.

'What, they've been lying low in the rocks?'

'It wasn't hard for them to hide,' said Dylan. 'They were only this big.' He showed her with his thumb and forefinger. 'Stiff, you know, not moving. On bases, like those soldiers Uncle Brett paints.'

He had held the little figures in his hand in the sunlight, waiting for Aaron to find him. He had admired their detail, the pregnant queen's fierce face and helm, the bear whose every hair seemed to have been molded separately. Its claws actually dug into Dylan's skin – he must make sure the littlies didn't get hold

of these. These were like Uncle Brett's soldiers; they were *not* toys. And the funny bald servant man, all hung about with bags and equipment – something about his face, Dylan just knew he was going to up and *complain*.

Mum still hovered there.

'So I put them in my pocket,' Dylan said. 'And when I got changed for bed, I put them under my pillow.'

'And in the night they . . . expanded?'

'Yes. Came to life.'

And the bed had broken under their weight, and Dylan had tumbled off the stinking bear, and then the queen struck him aside with a gauntleted hand (he rubbed the welts on his cheek), and the little bloke's bald head rose against the window and said some foreign words anxiously. The queen exclaimed and raved and waved her daggers about. The bear made an irritated noise on a blast of clover breath, and then the man's voice, which was high-pitched, almost like a woman's, said clearly, 'Please vacate the room. The queen requires complete privacy.'

And here they were. Auntie Rachel and the others in the tents hadn't even woken up. The *dog* hadn't even woken when they filed out past its basket on the veranda: Mum and Dad, Ella and Todd, Ed and Titch and Aaron and, last of all, Dylan.

All around him the sleepers breathed. The creek chuckled by. Mum's head sank to her pillow.

'Well, I don't understand it, Dyl,' she said. 'I have to believe you, because you're hopeless at lying, but a *bear*? And that woman with the armour on? Whoever heard of maternity

armour? It's got me beaten. I daresay it'll all come clear in the morning, though, even the bear. It'll be her husband or something, in a bear suit – one that needs a good dry cleaning. Didn't it *stink!*'

And she had talked herself, and Dylan, to sleep.

A high, anxious voice woke him. Dylan lifted his head. The bald manservant was walking, bent and hesitant, among the sleeping family. He held something to his mouth, some kind of magnifying glass, only without the glass, and he spoke through it.

'Can anyone help?' he said. 'My queen is in difficulties. Is there a midwife here? Any kind of leech, any wise woman? Please, my queen is in great pain.' And indeed, the bellowing from up the hill was rawer and more desperate now.

'You want my mother,' Dylan said as the man came close. 'She knows what to do at births.' He rocked Mum and patted her head as he spoke.

'She does?' said the man. Another instrument gleamed at the man's ear, and his lips moved differently from the words Dylan heard, as if he were in a dubbed movie. 'Then she is just the person we need. Bring her up to the hut immediately,' he said, suddenly imperious. 'I must return to my lady's side.'

But Mum wouldn't wake. Dylan shook and shook her; he tweaked her hair; he pinched her cheeks; he held her nose and covered her mouth. She batted him away – 'Don't *do that!*' – but her eyes didn't open, and as soon as she could breathe again, she was deeply asleep.

The queen's roaring went on.

'Come on, Mum!' Dylan shouted into her ear. 'Come and help with this baby! Mum, it's Dylan! Wake up and help!'

She didn't move. Her eyelids didn't even tremble. It was useless.

Dylan stood up. No one else had woken up, either; no one was going to. They were all magicked asleep, or weirded asleep. Whatever had to be done, *he* would have to do it.

He picked his way among the bodies and uphill over the stones and tough grass. At the top, the veranda shaded the mad face of the hut, two yellow window-eyes and a gaping door-mouth. He didn't know what the queen was saying, but there was so much rage in it that it must be swearing.

He climbed the stairs even more slowly. The bear's head was in the doorway – so big! – licking something off the floor. Dylan peered in, hoping the bear would move aside. The manservant wept and clasped his hands at his mouth, beside the roaring stove. A chain slung over one of the rafters held up a very dirty foot—

'Oh, there you are!' The servant hurried to the door. 'Out of the way – move, brute!' He pushed the bear's head aside with his foot. He frowned into the darkness beyond Dylan. 'Where is she?'

'She wouldn't wake up.'

'Fetch her, fetch her!'

'It's no good,' said Dylan. 'Whatever brought you here knocked everyone out. Put everyone to sleep. We'll have to manage without her.'