



JOHN  
BOLTON

POPPY AND THE MONSTER

Copyright © 2014 by John Bolton

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by John Bolton

The right of John Bolton to be identified as the Author  
of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form  
or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,  
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other  
than that in which it is published and without a similar condition  
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance  
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Typeset in Garamond No. 3

Word Heap's policy is to use papers that are natural,  
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown  
in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes  
are expected to conform to the environmental regulations  
of the country of origin

John Bolton  
johnmlbolton@gmail.com  
www.wordheap.co.uk

Kat White  
katizabitwhite@gmail.com

*For every child who has ever pulled the covers up over  
their head at night, and for any grownups that still do*

# POPPY AND THE MONSTER

She sat humming to herself as the foam on her belly slowly wilted. The water had drained in no time at all and had left her sitting in a cold puddle. She studied the bubbles, intrigued by their lingering deaths. She felt the cool air on her back. Her hair was damp because she had tried to lie back in the water, only to find herself too short. She ignored it. At that moment she was interested only in the bubbles. Bubbles fascinated her. They were almost magical, though not the kind that produced rabbits from a top hat or coloured bunting from a sleeve. Bubbles had always captivated her, and had become her favourite things about the Sunday tea-time bath.

Sunday itself was a slow, tedious, pointless trudge towards Monday. There was nothing on TV, she was never allowed out to play, and the chances were slim of there being something for lunch that might expect to come with chips. All she was left with was the tea-time bath, and Poppy loved every bit of it. She loved leaving the shampoo in her hair so she could make funny hairstyles in the mirror. She loved the way her hands and feet were always wrinkly afterwards. And she especially loved dissolving the remaining bubbles with talcum powder. It sometimes took ages cleaning the gluey talc off the sides of the bath afterwards, but she thought it was worth it.

“Poppy?”

A voice was calling from the other side of the bathroom door.

“Poppy? Still alive in there?”

It was her mum.

“Yes!” Poppy replied brightly.

“Okay, just checking you haven’t gone down the plug hole.”

Poppy giggled. “No!”

“Do you want a hot chocolate?”

“Oooh, yes please!” she gasped.

“Okay, it’ll only be five minutes, so get yourself dried and come down for it.”

“Okay, mummy.”

She heard her mum’s slippers pad away. Poppy stepped out of the tub and stood shivering for a moment while she grabbed the towel off the radiator. She hung it over herself like a cloak and dried her long, curly red hair briskly as she walked out onto the landing. Her parent’s bedroom door was open and her dad was sitting on the edge of the bed with the phone cradled between his head and his shoulder. Poppy drew the towel around herself as she passed him.

In her bedroom, she got her dressing gown and crossed over to her bed. She drew her curtains, pulled the sleeves from inside the gown and slipped it onto her shoulders. She teased her arms into it, drew it across herself and tied the cord in a poor knot. She moved silently across the carpet towards the door. As she approached it, she turned very slowly, almost nervously, to the wardrobe. But she didn't stop moving.

Poppy sat at the kitchen table, slouched forwards, her face poised over her mug of hot chocolate. She gazed down at it, wondering if it would actually cool down by bedtime. She didn’t think so. She tried to imagine as far into the future as she could, the most distant event imaginable, an event right at the very end of time itself. She pictured the end of that event. Everyone would have gone home, and people would be vacuuming and tidying and weaving in and out of the seats

spearing polystyrene cups with a spike on a stick. And there she'd be, still gazing at her hot chocolate and waiting for it to cool.

She'd seen men doing this peculiar cup-spearing in the park when she walked home from school with her mum. It was a sight that intrigued her, like the impossibly tall men at the circus. She was also fascinated by the people on swings who, without anyone to push them, could get themselves swinging almost as high as the bar the swing was chained to. She held a deep admiration for them, a respect she also held for people who were courageous enough to go down the slides *head first*.

She poked a finger into her drink and retracted it with a yelp. If the most distant event ever had only been two minutes into the future, her drink certainly hadn't cooled in that time.

"Still hot?" her father asked as he brushed past her into the kitchen.

Poppy nodded. "It just won't cool down!"

Her father glanced around for a moment, then leant over Poppy's shoulder and blew at her drink. The surface rippled, and hot chocolate dribbled down the sides of the mug.

"Daddy!" Poppy gasped.

Her father grinned. Poppy lifted the mug carefully and her father slipped a tea towel under it. Poppy set the mug down again.

“Mum’s the word,” he said.

He spotted a large square tin on top of the washing machine and retreated with it. A moment later he was back.

“Why do we keep the all the sewing stuff in an old biscuit tin in the first place?” he mumbled. He picked up a hexagonal tin and marched out with it, shaking it on the way to make sure it sounded like there were biscuits inside.

Poppy poked a thumb into her drink, and pulled away with a similarly pained expression. She’d tested it with all her digits now, and unless she started on her toes, she’d have to go back through them.

“Oh Poppy!” her mum said with exasperation as she came into the kitchen with her hands loaded with dirty cups. She looked a little like a mug tree. “Why don’t you take it upstairs with you? You don’t have to sit in the kitchen all night!”

Poppy looked up at her mum and smiled. “Okay!” she said, her eyes twinkling.

Her mum opened the fridge door and took out the milk. “Oh, Poppy, I meant to ask...when is Sarah’s birthday party?”

Poppy screwed up her face to help squeeze the information into her brain. “Next Saturday,” she said. Then: “I’m not going.”

“How come? You two are the best of friends!” her mum said, pouring milk very carefully into Poppy’s drink.

“She’s inviting Bobby Doyle.”

“What’s wrong with Bobby Doyle?”

Poppy shook her head. “He likes Abigail!”

“Abigail Dunn? You *like* Abigail Dunn!” She returned the milk to the fridge, then stirred Poppy’s drink.

“I do not!” She reflected briefly on recent events in the playground.

“I did...”

Her mum nodded and smiled at her daughter. “So you aren’t going because Sarah likes Bobby Doyle, who likes Abigail Dunn, who you don’t like?”

Poppy nodded.

“Why don’t you like him?”

“Because he’s strange!”

“Poppy, you know it’s not nice to say things like that about people!”

“On sports day he ate a worm!”

Poppy’s mum nodded. “Mmm, well...I suppose that is quite strange. Well okay, you let me know if you change your mind.”

“Okay,” she replied. She picked her drink up by the handle and carried it carefully out of the kitchen.

The walk to her bedroom took nearly three minutes as she walked with exaggerated care and slowness. When she reached her bedroom, she set her mug down on the landing and stood looking at the head-height notice that had her name blazoned across it. Her mum had written it on the back of an old church newsletter, and Poppy had sat copying it studiously. She had only been four then. The bright red writing (red had been her favourite colour when she was four) was already starting to fade because direct sunlight poured on to it through the spare bedroom window. Poppy didn’t mind. It had faded to pink, and that was her favourite colour now.

As for the June '12 copy of the *Parish News*, its final moments were spent in the kitchen bin where, owing to the breakfast eaten after its disposal, it drowned under a torrent of eggshells, yolk, soggy cereal and fragments of toast.

Poppy reached out and touched the door handle. She turned it, her heart beat quickening as she imagined some horrible monster standing on the other side. She pushed the door ajar and released the handle. Maybe the monster would eat her, or maybe it would just kill her and leave her lying in bed for her parents to find. Or maybe it would do the things that made parents and teachers warn children about strangers. Whatever that was, it had to be pretty bad. Whatever strangers did to children had to be worse than anything she could imagine. Maybe tonight she'd find out what made her mum collect her from school every day, even though it meant her walking all the way from work.

Inside her room there was nothing but blackness.

She stepped in a little way and went for the light switch.

*Click.*

Blackness. It didn't shock her half as much as it had the first time it happened. It was something electrical, her dad said. He always fixed

it. He knew all sorts of clever things. The dining room table always had a sheet of newspaper on it, and her mum complained about it *a lot*. On that sheet of paper she had seen the bowels of remote controls, a broken toaster, the scarily fragile insides of stopped watches, and once even the broken skeleton of an umbrella he'd discovered in the garage and had intended to mend. Although her dad was always the one who had broken the artefacts sat on the dining room table, he was also the one who could fix them. Usually. Admittedly, the umbrella had eventually had to go in the bin. And Poppy remembered at least two occasions where her mum had to buy a new remote control (and a new toaster) on the internet. And Poppy had never seen her mum or her dad wearing any of the watches her dad had been trying to mend...

Poppy sighed uncomfortably and stepped a little further into her bedroom. The darkness wasn't so bad: there was still enough light coming in from the landing to illuminate her way. In any case, she knew where everything was so it would probably be impossible for her to fall over anything.

"Owch!" she exclaimed as her shin banged painfully against her dressing table. She screwed her face up and tensed every muscle she could as the short rush of pain engulfed her. She hobbled forwards a

step, then turned and sat back on the edge of the dresser. “Ooh, owch!” she cursed again and rubbed her bare shin. When her door banged shut she sprang up with fright and fell reeling into the blackness.

A chill raced down Poppy’s spine, lifting the hairs on the back of her neck. She looked up slowly, squinting. She knew at any moment something would grab her, snatch her away, into the wardrobe and beyond, to some unfathomable nightmare. Her heart was thumping in her chest, her head was pounding. It was so dark. Her breath came in frantic snatches. She heard something move. Her dry mouth opened to scream.

“Poppy?”

The scream came out as a frightened yelp.

The bedroom door opened.

“I’m sorry, love...I just opened the bathroom door, and the draft must have closed yours! Are you all right?”

No monster, only her dad. Although she’d once watched her dad frustratedly trying to mend something on the car and frankly there hadn’t been much difference that day. “Yes...I was a bit scared.”

“Of the dark?” her dad asked.

Although she nodded, it wasn't the dark she was afraid of. She was afraid of what's *in* the dark.

"Why didn't you..." Her dad flicked the light switch. "Oh, bulb's gone."

Poppy smiled. It all seemed funny now. Her dad disappeared, and in the time he took getting a new bulb, Poppy slipped out of her dressing gown and into her nightie.

"Okay," her dad said. He took Poppy's chair and stood on it. He removed the dead bulb and popped the new one in. He turned it a few times and it came on suddenly. Both of them jerked their heads away and blinked.

"Presto," her dad said. Poppy looked at him with awe. She didn't understand how he did it, and maybe that was why it was so fascinating to watch.

"Thank you, daddy," she said.

"No problem," he replied. "Now, do you want a story before you go to sleep?" he asked.

Poppy considered. "No thanks, I'll read."

"Are you sure?"

Poppy nodded.

Her dad grinned. “Okay then...my little Poppy-lolly, already reading to herself!” He hugged her. For those brief moments, Poppy felt as safe as any child could. She silently wished it would never end, that he would never let her go. “I love youp.”

“I love you toop,” she said.

He kissed her, and stepped away. “Don’t stay up too late, o-cake?” he said.

Poppy nodded. “O-cake.”

Her dad closed the door behind himself.

She had maybe fifteen or fifty or five minutes before her mum would come up and say good night. She’d tuck Poppy in, kiss her, then switch her light out. Night time was all about routine. Her bedroom door would be left ajar, and a thin pike of light would come in from the landing. Her dad would later turn that light off. Routine. And no matter how hard Poppy tried, she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep before that. She’d try and try and try, but she’d still be awake when her dad shuffled to her doorway to look in on her.

She didn't like being awake when the lights finally went off. She needed the light because she knew that the things that hid in the shadows couldn't come out if there was a light on. Things, after all, never went bump in the day. There were rules. Children learnt that vampires can't just wander into your room without invitation, just as the shapeless horror in the wardrobe can't come out unless it's dark. Children and monsters knew this rule, and agreed to live by it. After all, the monsters knew that sooner or later a child would forget to leave the light on. And, when that night came, the wardrobe door would creep open and something terrible would drag itself across the room. The child would hear something, but just as their hand reached for the switch, the monster would snatch that hand away and drag the child, bedclothes and all, into the shadows.

She believed it unconditionally. Childhood was about belief, the belief that kept children in a state of enchantment. But belief swung both ways. The thing that made the heroin shriek and shriek with fright and the thing the evil scientist made out of spare parts – they were all real. And they were all there, waiting hungrily, when the lights went out and her dad's footsteps padded away into silence.

Same thing every night. He'd tell her he loved her, shut her door, and shuffle off back downstairs. Poppy would mouth 'I love you too', then roll on to her side and lie there silently until she fell asleep. Routine. Maybe she stayed awake to hear her dad whisper that to her, thinking she was asleep, thinking those words would guard over her during the night. Maybe it was just fear, as she lay there, duvet up over her nose, peering out furtively at the shadows. At least when her door was shut, it was just dark. No shapes, no figures. Just dark.

She switched on her bedside lamp, then walked briskly to her door. She reached for the light switch. Decisively, she flicked it off and got into bed. The book she selected from the pile of library books on her bedside table was *Not Now, Bernard*. She'd read it before a million times. It made her giggle during the daytime, and sometimes at night. At least in the early evening. But sometimes it was a bit scary. It was about a boy called Bernard who one day met a monster. The monster ate him, then ate all manner of things in Bernard's home – including his tea – and finally went to bed. Went, that is, to *Bernard's* bed. It wasn't the pictures that sometimes scared Poppy – the pictures of a big purple monster. It was the plausibility.

She opened the book and began to read it slowly, her eyes darting from the words to the picture. A normal-looking boy – could be the boy next door, the boy who sat by her in assembly at school. It could even be Bobby Doyle. She did sort of think Bobby Doyle might deserve to be eaten by a monster. Especially a giant worm monster. But the monster in the book was the purple kind. A plausible boy and a plausible (purple) monster. It could happen to anyone. *Could happen to her*. Her stomach was in knots. She shut the book sharply. Perhaps it was time to go to sleep. She switched off her bedside light and turned onto her side. Hiding under the covers usually calmed her nerves. It was secure.

**Thump!**

Loud and frightening. Made by something *big*. Poppy sat up suddenly, her eyes flitting towards the sound which still echoed in her head. Had that noise come from inside there? How could that be?

**Thump!**

There it was again. The same noise. It sounded like someone pounding the ground...it sounded, in fact, like the noise made when, after he had fallen over in the garden and hurt his ankle, her dad took

revenge by beating the grass with the flat of a spade. Big and loud. What in her wardrobe could fall and make that noise? What could fall twice? She hoped it wouldn't come again. She was sure if it did, she'd *know* it had come from the wardrobe.

**Thump!**

Poppy's eyes were as wide as plates as the book fell from her grip and slipped off the bed onto the floor. Her gaze was fixed towards the wardrobe. If she heard it so much as twitch, she would bolt. She wondered if she could make it out of the room in time. She hoped she could make it out before the wardrobe was open enough for her to catch sight of what was inside.

**Thump!**

Fear turned very quickly into terror when alone in the dark. Poppy's hand snatched at her bedside table. She fumbled for the light switch. She grasped the cord. Lost it. Found it again and held it tightly. She ran her fingers along it, desperately trying to find the switch. Across the room there was a noise. She tried to couple it with an image, tried to make it familiar. A sliding noise. She abandoned the light. The bolt for the door was now her only choice. She flung the covers off

herself and leaped out of bed. Stood in the dark, she waited, listened. Silence. Maybe she'd imagined it. Maybe the book had just got her scared and jumpy.

But then the noise changed. Still something sliding, but this time not a wardrobe door with a full-size mirror in it that would have made the room look huge if it hadn't been placed opposite the bedroom door. This was something sliding *out* of the wardrobe. Something grotesque, some foul creature, some *It*.

She walked forwards but knew she was already lost. She tried to get her bearings, tried to picture what her room looked like from her bed. Desk, chair, beanbag, dolls house, TV...but it didn't help. She was only six. What worked in her favour also worked against her. Sometimes the simple logic was the greatest aid, sometimes it was no use at all. Her room was a rectangle. Each of the four sides represented what she owned. One side was her bed, another was her desk. The remaining two held her wardrobe and her door. But with no light and no time, she might just as well be in the wardrobe with whatever had chosen that moment to come out.

There was darkness all around, thick and black. She was surrounded by it, drowning in it. If a Park Policeman were here, he'd

be able to help. He'd show Poppy where the door was, and he'd hold the wardrobe door shut until she'd fled.

But there wasn't one. She was alone.

Well...not precisely alone.

Whatever *It* was, it was on the move. Slowly. It was coming closer, and if it got to her it would be over. The bedroom light wouldn't matter. The wrathful swipe of its taloned claw would be the last thing she'd be aware of. Unless it didn't kill her. Then maybe she'd be vaguely aware of it beginning to eat her, like Bobby Doyle's worm. She had to get to her bed. She stepped forward and went to make a mad dash away from her predator.

**Thump!**

She fell backwards, reeling in the darkness from a collision that momentarily knocked all sense out of her. She'd run into the wall. She sat up, dazed, her hands massaging her head simply because that was what they did in cartoons. No little birds, though, nor stars. Just pain. She imagined the speckles of light she was seeing was what pins and needles looked like. Pins and needles in the head. She winced as she pressed her right temple where she'd taken the impact. It was already

bloating into a bump. She only hoped she'd be alive the next morning to worry about it in the mirror before school. She prayed she'd be in the playground the next morning, explaining how she'd done it fighting a monster, her friends *ooing* and *aaabing* with admiration. But tomorrow morning was a million years away. As far away at least as the men spearing polystyrene cups and the lukewarm feel of her hot chocolate on her tongue.

She tried to stand. Her bottom ached painfully. The world swam, a pale, surging grey. Hoping she hadn't broken her brain, Poppy tried again to get up. She was aware that her company in the black room was still approaching. Her grasp of physics extended no further than a general wondering about why when left out, hot drinks go cold (eventually) and cold drinks get warm, but she felt sure that by now her adversary should be upon her. Whatever nightmare was going to happen by then should have happened.

That was how she knew she was being played with. It was a game. The beast at the other end of the room, dripping slime onto her yellow carpet, its foul chest heaving with each monstrous breath, would let her get to the bed. Maybe to save itself the trouble of dragging her there. It would let her reach for the light switch. And as her thumb went to

flick it, and as her mind expected the spot light to throw a bright pyramid of light across the room, it would take her. One heavy blow with a warty forearm. Quick. Painless. Final.

She rose almost to a stand, but the world was already swimming again. She got onto all fours and edged forward. Her head stuck the wall again, and this time she began to cry. The pain was strong and searing. Tears streamed down her. Her mouth opened to scream words she had never used with an anger and frustration she'd never felt before in her life. Her bogeyman was almost upon her, and there was nothing she could do. In the silence of the room she heard herself squeal with agony. Her hands clutched at her forehead.

She jolted, and suddenly found herself on her knees. Something had touched her. Or had it? She wasn't precisely sure. Her nightie had ridden up, and she'd felt something touch her. As she froze where she was, fixed to the spot with terror, her body played the sensation back. It had been breath. Hot and fetid on her leg. It was close, far closer than she'd thought. Maybe it had grown impatient.

She tried to move but was frozen. She put herself in mind of the morning her mum had called her down to see the washing. It was been a desperately cold night, and the washing (two shirts and a row of socks)

had frozen on the line. Poppy had been given a petrified sock to scrutinise, and Poppy knew if her monster took her now, he'd have a similar experience. In many ways it would be like playing with her teddy. The monster would pass Poppy from one hairy fist to another, and eventually give up and eat her whole.

It was impossible for her to escape now. She felt sure she had no hope. And even if she did manage to get up again without falling back down, it would be impossible for her to make it to the bed before whatever was going to happen happened. But was that true? Or was it possible that this monster's little game might actually be her chance? Playing with her might be its undoing. Maybe she would have a chance at escape if she was quick. She believed it, and belief was enough.

She made herself get up onto her haunches. She reached out, using her outstretched arms like antennae, feeling her way forwards. Her hands brushed the wall. It was cold. She stayed low, knowing that she had to make use of her size. How many times had she seen the hero in a cartoon slip between the legs of the villain and get away? Maybe that was how she'd escape. She didn't know. She felt down the wall's cold surface until her hands touched the carpet. She'd feel her way to the

bed. Her hands moved anxiously, her body beginning to shake with fear. This was really it. This was the day she faced her fears.

A paw grabbed her ankle. It was always the way. Poppy had seen enough cartoons about zombies and werewolves, she knew there was a formula that had to be followed. It had started when she turned off the light, knowing there was a monster in there. It had been unthinkably stupid, but she'd had to. It was part of the formula. The girl, alone and afraid, hears some monster outside the house, outside the warmth and safety of the house. And, armed only with a candle, out she goes. To investigate? Maybe that, maybe just to get eaten. And eaten she inevitably would be. And here was Poppy, a six-year-old girl, living the final chapters of her childhood, trapped in the very same formula. The dark room, the monster, the frightened girl. It was all there. And all it had needed was for the thing to grab her ankle. Never a knee, or an arm around the waist, always the ankle. And it would drag her, and she would flail her arms and eventually find something that would help her to get away. She'd run, hide, and just as she turned around, her heart rate settling and her face lit with relief, it'd get her.

And sure enough, this thing had its claw round her ankle. She could feel hairs, short and coarse, she could hear it breathing heavily as

if it was exhausted...or hungry. She thought again of her mother's face the evening she'd told her of the Park Policeman and the sweets he'd offered her. She knew that the look her mother's face had worn had stretched across hers the moment that plundering paw had grabbed her. She could feel claws against her skin. She tried to struggle free, managing only to get herself tangled and restricted in her nightie. She reached out, trying to grasp something that might help her. Then it pulled, and Poppy felt herself drag along the floor, the carpet burning her belly painfully. She tried to kick free, but it caught her foot.

She was powerless. She couldn't do a thing. Until it made a mistake. One careless mistake was all it would take. And left to fate, a mistake might not be out of the question.

It had all the advantages of strength and power and control of the moment, but Poppy had fear and the instinct to escape if any opportunity presented itself. And just then, it released her. Maybe to get a better grip, maybe to change arm. But in that moment, Poppy was gone. She scrambled to her knees and almost managed to flee. But straight away there came a frustrated grunt. Poppy was unable to see a thing, but her monster saw everything. When Poppy crawled blindly away, all it had to do was casually reach out and grab her.

A cold, hairy arm was round her waist in a flash, holding her tightly, squeezing her. She was paralysed, and no amount of kicking would help her. Its breathing was louder than ever, and faintly she could even make out its heart beat, irregular and inhuman. It span her onto her back, and Poppy's head hit the floor. The blow was cushioned by her dressing gown. Her heart pounded. She tried to move, but couldn't. She felt doomed. But she didn't believe it. She believed she still had a chance.

That belief made her thrust her arm forward and project her dressing gown at the thing that held her. The garment clearly hit with accuracy for immediately she was released and there was an annoyed bark. There was the sound of ruffling material, and Poppy felt the wind of her dressing gown as it flew over her head. She crawled on her hands and knees, over her discarded weapon. This time she made some progress and had almost grasped the bed sheet when her legs were grabbed again, this time with anger. This time it wasn't letting go for anything. It held her knees in its paw. Poppy reached out, unconsciously deciding to grab the first thing she could. The thing she found, and the thing that turned the whole thing around, was a school

shoe. She held it in her right hand and lashed out. The shoe hit something very soft very hard, and she was free again.

There was an agonised bellow, and she heard the monster draw away, retreating back to the far side of the room. She heard it scuffle along the carpet awkwardly. It made no attempt to return to her, to regain its hold on her. All it did was sit there panting with exasperation and pain. Poppy felt for the night light and traced down the cord to the switch.

*Click.*

Poppy was so dazzled she had to pinch her eyes shut and cover them with both hands. It was long moments before she could draw the hands away one at a time and open her eyes a little. She squinted around.

No one in the room but her.

A shoe lay discarded by the wardrobe door, but that was all there was to hint of a struggle. Poppy blinked in the brightness, rising to a stand and walking to the bedroom door. Her heart was still pounding, but she was no longer afraid. She'd won. It was over. Not a trace of any monster. There was no slime she was sure had dripped on the carpet.

There was nothing. There was only the shattered remnants of her fear and her belief in a monster that wasn't really there. That belief was gone now. She knew if she told her parents about her monster, they would ask her about it, but they wouldn't believe her. They didn't believe in anything. Monsters, ghosts, anything. And they were never afraid. Maybe when people just stopped believing in things, they couldn't hurt them anymore. Her parents never spoke of nightmares, of things hiding in the shadows. Because they *knew* those things weren't real. Monsters weren't real. When she'd turned on the light, she'd been alone.

Poppy looked into her wardrobe, saw her reflection in the gold metal frame of the left hand door. She saw a scared little girl, but no monster. She sighed. Just to her left was one of her dolls, a slender, naked, plastic woman who had once been the famous actress Champagne Doolally. She turned it over in her hands. Poppy could barely remember Champagne's first film, in which she'd played the first teacher in space. Maybe, she thought, she'd give them all to the girl next door. She was only four. There was another in the bathroom, too. And more downstairs. And the dolls house. She could have that too. She'd have a look through her wardrobe tomorrow night, see if she

could find any more. After all, there was nothing to be afraid of in there anymore.

With resolution, she reached out and slid the door across.