When Chloe Hooper's partner is diagnosed with a rare and aggressive illness, she has to find a way to tell their two young sons. By instinct, she turns to the bookshelf. Can the news be broken as a bedtime tale? Is there a perfect book to prepare children for loss? Hooper embarks on a quest to find what practical lessons children's literature – with its innocent orphans and evil adults, magic, monsters and anthropomorphic animals – can teach about grief and resilience in real life.

We begin with chapter one.

Every night when the light's switched off, familiar objects in your room mutate. What daylight tames, the dark untames. Book-shelves, reading lamp, a dressing gown draped on the door, all gather a silent force. The stillness feels alive, as if each thing is deciding how to behave.

At first, there's a thrill to this sudden chaos. You're not yet listening to the in-and-out of your own breathing, not yet decoding the noises in and outside the house. The shimmer of the dark makes climbing into bed feel less like surrendering. You've used all your wiles to put off this moment, and yet it turns out your limbs are heavy and the sheets are cool.

You wait while we draw the curtains against the night (or any dawn waking). You wait as we straighten you and your brother's bedclothes; already he can't stop his eyelids from closing. You keep waiting and we reshelve the picture books. On these books' pages life is reduced to its essential elements. The sun is a yellow ball in the sky. The road a black ribbon leading to green. The woods are reliably timbered, and within them a monster is a monster; no need to factor in *his* childhood. The stories are soothing because the turnings of the plot are so well-worn, their surprises practised. Each night people are sad then happy. They get lost and found, and return to their houses that have a front door between two windows.

It doesn't occur to your father or me to tell you what is really happening here inside this house. Why the force between objects is charged differently for us too. We don't want to let dread through the bedroom door. And we don't want anything about these nights to change. All the most mundane tasks – tooth- brushes cajoled into mouths, limbs into pyjamas – are suddenly revealed as precious, and if we diverge from the nightly routine in any way, everything could break apart.

There's a couch set against the wall between you and your brother's beds. Your father sits there in the glow of a planet-earth nightlight. If you turn you can see his profile. Glasses on a still boyish nose, but a forehead lined deeply; sometimes there's the win, even in the dark, of breaking through the thicket of his thoughts to make him smile.

Your father – Don, as you call him – is older than your friends' fathers, you know this. (I was born in the 'olden days', as you put it, but he in the 'olden, olden days'.) One of the advantages of his age is that he knows more stories, and you prefer him to put you to bed because then the picture books are only the prelude. When he's finished reading, he makes up something just for you. Both of us are writers although the original bedtime tales are his domain.

You lie in the fresh anarchy of the dark, waiting for his voice with an electric attention. But standing by the light switch, I know I need to find a way to talk with you about the shadows.

A child's fear of the dark may not even be about the dark. The heightened sense that something hideous waits in the dim-ness may be born when children start to learn there are mysteries they can't fathom. A veil is drawn back slightly: the child intuits the scale of things which cannot be controlled.

The beginning of these hours alone in a closed and unlit, or barely lit, space becomes perilous. Even a heartbeat could give someone away. In the 1920s the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget recorded rituals that children devise to keep themselves safe, observing: 'A boy who lived in a somewhat lonely house' believed 'if he could succeed in drawing the curtains very quickly the robbers would not come'. Other such 'rites to ward off danger' included 'hiding under the bedclothes, turning the back to the door, drawing the blanket up to exactly the chin, etc ... Another felt protected if on getting into bed, the clothes were completely tucked in all around so that she

could slip in without anywhere unmaking the bed. If by chance she found the clothes not tucked in, or, that they had come unmade as she got in, she felt herself threatened by danger.'

Perversely, adults set about peopling, or rather monstering, the dark for kids – to instruct or entertain or to control them.

The bottomless, complicated evil of the world we codify into witches and ogres, into the grim figures that your six-year-old brain now imagines reaching out and grabbing you. Yet hob-goblins and bugaboos are dangers you'll never actually need to confront.

Cancer is the bogeyman for adults. Later, in the pandemic, people will come to fear droplets of others' spit and snot – stuff kids trade in unblinkingly – but that contagion works by a series of links, a chain of contamination stretching back to an animal and a human's ill-fated encounter; the terror in this case is outside, potentially everywhere. Cancer comes from within and provokes a different form of panic. A person walks down the street, leading a regular life, and suddenly *they* are the one. Any part of a body is vulnerable. It can find a home in an eye, throat, ovary, bladder, testicle, brain, breast – one's most hidden or prized part – then spread.

Before our recent visit to the hospital, your father's mood darkened: how seamlessly in these moments the surrealism kicks in. We'd initially been told his leukaemia was not a dangerous one. The haematologist, a droll woman, swollen with pregnancy, assured us that fortunes had been spent to make certain blood cancers, common in older white men, non-fatal. But she ordered extra tests anyway, and we had walked to her office down a seemingly endless hallway to hear the results. In a luminous white room, she showed us scans revealing enlarged lymph nodes throughout your father's body. The cancer levels in his blood had risen in just a fortnight. The haematologist had never seen this particular strain of leukaemia, she told us, and was seeking her colleagues' advice.

Don had the taciturn manner of an old farmer on a visit to the city. He was dressed like one too: a navy jumper over a shirt with a collar never sitting right. 'How long do I have?'

'You want this conversation?' she checked briskly.

If it was one form of leukaemia, five years. If it was a 'feral' form – and her manner hinted that this was her suspicion – there would be far less time. To discover his fate, Don needed to sign a form permitting further tests, on his bone marrow. These results would take a month.

Four whole weeks. Twenty-eight days before he's to return to the neat purgatory of the waiting room so as to wait some more – and in the meantime I have to start to educate you about the real dark.

Amidst your father's strife, this is surely one task I can handle. But how do I explain something that adults find near impossible to fathom? Only clichés rear up at me. Should I tell you not to be scared? Why would you not be? Should I say that sickness and death are natural? But so are many terrifying things.

I begin to imagine a book that I will find and read to you. It will be written simply, clearly; gently levering open a crushing conversation, with each illustration capturing some essential poetry. Perhaps these images are initially black and white, before colour rushes in towards the end, with golden, hope-flecked fire- works blooming on the last page. A finale signalling that this will one day be bearable, there will be grace! And meanwhile, the text won't have said too much or too little, providing us, wonderfully, with a map of how to survive. If I squint, I can almost see it, this perfect children's picture book of death ...

That's what I want. Only that.

Basically, I'm telling *myself* a children's story: in a crisis we revert to the safety of the plot that ends happily.

As slowly the month of evenings starts to pass, I cast my eye, yet again over your shelves, searching for anything I might have forgotten, any book that will help us practise the unhappy ending.

Traditional children's literature is soaked in death. You have a beautifully illustrated edition of *Aesop's Fables*, every story a compact nature documentary; a fox kills, say, a bird to demonstrate a moral. You have a book of Greek myths that I found abandoned on the street in which family

members kill each other; and of course, the fairytales, seemingly more humble affairs, where death has already visited. All may end well, but the tales are populated by orphans and widowers and infanticidal stepmothers.

Fairytales are thrillers for children. Over and over we've read them for the heart-quickening suspense. Will Hansel be eaten?

Will Jack break his neck climbing down the beanstalk? Will Rapunzel, escaping the tower? Will the wolf blow down all the houses? (You covet our neighbours' brick homes because of the pigs' travails.) Will the woodcutter arrive in time?

How long will Don survive?

I ask your father to record the stories he tells you. Neither of us needs to say why.

While your brother, Gabriel, is asleep amidst his zoo of soft animals, you lie still. This is your favourite way for the dark to be subdued. Your father's voice has mellow and gruff notes, making the sentences stretch and break, cracking the night open. The bed is a kind of boat then, and you are sailing ...

... You're on holiday with your brother and your best friend, and you've seen a sign: 'Diving Tours'. Rustling up the money, the three of you climb aboard an old clinker. Out on the water it's a clear blue day, but it soon becomes apparent that the crew of one is incompetent. When a shark circles the boat, the skipper is sleeping off a hangover. Your companions are down on the ocean floor. Thinking quickly, you grind up some sleeping tablets you've found in the boat's medicine cabinet. You stuff this into sandwiches packed by the tour company for lunch, and throw them to the shark. *Zzzzzzzzzz!* The divers are saved!

In Don's tale you are strong and clever and brave. And you accept that the adults around you barely know what they are doing. Your father remains within arm's reach – all five feet nine inches of his stiff-necked, sun-reddened, impatient, funny, tender self – and in the globe-lit dark, he is bringing you into being word by word.

Storytellers offer more than just their voice; they are a companion on the adventure – and nothing can happen to the teller mid-tale. If Don keeps the narrative going, he's protected for another night. But 1001 of them will not be enough. They add up to only two and three-quarter years, and we need more time.

In children's stories, people exist in another element. If there's darkness, it serves to highlight the glint of the miraculous, animals turning and opening their mouths to offer priceless advice ... In the past 18 months, you've asked Don whether a favourite television show featuring a squad of cats and dogs is real. He asked if you'd seen any animals driving down our street recently. You considered this, looking unconvinced. Just because you hadn't seen such a spectacle didn't mean it wasn't possible. For young children, there's barely a division between the real and the imagined anyway. Being a fantasist holds no shame.

You believe in magic and when he's in your room telling you a bedtime story, he's allowed to think magically too. So, what can a string of words actually do? The idea of language being enchanted is an ancient one, but can a story save a person? Can the right one pull us back to life? Certainly, a book can save a slice of life, as anyone who rereads knows. Years later, a sentence will return a person to the very room they first found it in. Your father's stories transport the two of you somewhere else. Somewhere he can try to ward off what's to come. You are keeping the storyteller safe. He is holding the dark at bay for you, as are you for him.

Bedtime Stories by Chloe Hooper is published by Simon & Schuster, rrp $34.99

Listen to the podcast icon