

Winning Butty Seán Dunne serial young writers Award
- Noel Ó'Regan

How to Defend against Vikings

The Viking first came to our house last week after my bed time. The roar of his car woke me. I heard him bang on the front door, trying to break it down. He must have bullied Mom's name from a neighbour, because I heard him shout: 'Sinead, Sinead, are you there?' I thought about Dad, away on business, unable to defend our settlement. I was about to get out of bed and vanquish him when Mom raced downstairs.

'Will you be fucking quiet,' she said. She whispered the rest, but I could still hear the anger in her voice.

'Sorry, sorry,' the Viking said, already sounding on the brink of retreat. Good, I thought. She's fighting him off. When I heard his car start, I stood on my bed and watched his red dragon of a car fly away.

I'd been studying Vikings at school before Dad left. I told him about all of it: how the boats Vikings used for raids were called "longships"; that the monks built round towers to protect themselves; the founding of Dublin; the Battle of Clontarf, and Brian Boru's victory over the invaders. One night before he went away, Dad sat me down at the kitchen table and told me how there were still Vikings today, though they were sneakier and harder to spot. 'You have to be careful that they don't come and take what's yours.'

The Viking came back the next night, and the night after that, and Mom seemed to have more trouble driving him off. So she began to trick him, laughing at his jokes and offering him wine. I snuck half-way down the stairs, at one point, and saw them sitting on the couch. Her head rested on the back of the couch, close enough to the Viking that she could give him a head-butt if he tried anything. He didn't look like the Vikings in my school book. He didn't have an axe or a helmet with horns. I tried not to feel disappointed by this. He looked more like a poor, about-to-be beheaded monk, with his thin arms and beardless face and glasses. But when his phone rang, he gave away his true identity, answering in a rough and rushed Viking language that I couldn't understand. As I retreated upstairs, I thought how Dad was right. Vikings were harder to spot nowadays.

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The next day I snuck on the internet while Mom sat in the back garden, reading what Dad called her 'Mills & Swoon' books. I typed: *how to defend against Vikings*, and wrote all the information I needed into my copybook. *When the Vikings attempted to break into a high-walled structure, the settlers dropped objects on the invading force. These objects included large rocks, boulders and hot tar. This occurred in a time when the Vikings were pillaging all along the eastern coast of Ireland.* I frowned at the word "pillaging" and imagined the Viking sneaking upstairs to steal Mom's headache pills; the trouble that would cause. I couldn't let that happen.

Ultimately, the Irish were forced to meet the Vikings in battle. The Battle of Clontarf occurred on the 23rd April 1014 and ended in a rout of the Viking forces.

Dad called in the afternoon. Mom handed me the phone without speaking to him; I think a part of her knew how important it was that I talked with him first. I wanted so bad to tell him about the Viking, and how I was planning to defeat him. That I was going to protect our settlement, now that Mom's tricks had stopped working. But then I remembered how Dad was before he left: the way he got into lots of shouting battles with Mom; that morning he cried as he ate his porridge, the stink off him the same as Uncle Barry, who Mom called "Barfly Barry". Maybe it was better if I didn't say anything about the Viking. I didn't want him to worry more than he already was. Dad really seemed to hate being away on business. I'd already told him he should quit his job if he hated it that much.

'Hi Dad.'

'Hi Star, how're you doing?'

'Fine.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'How's the football going?'

'Good, we're playing Laune Rangers tomorrow.'

Dad sighed down the phone. I wondered if where he was staying was nicer than here. I could hear music in the background, from a radio, maybe. His voice sounded more cracked than before, like he was thirsty.

'Dad?'

'Yeah, Star?'

'Did Brian Boru drive all the Vikings out of Ireland?' I asked him.

‘Well, no, some stayed.’

‘And what happened to them?’

‘They became Irish, I suppose. After a while.’

‘So couldn’t these new Vikings become Irish too?’

I heard a bang on the other end of the phone. Had the radio fallen over? ‘No,’ Dad said. ‘They’re just here to steal from us, okay? And they need to be driven out.’

I nodded. ‘Okay.’

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I spent the evening collecting weapons and storing them in my bedroom. Fist-sized and pointy rocks I found behind the unfinished house across the estate; the sword-length knife that Mom used to cut butternut squash; smaller knives and forks as back-up. Before bed, I snuck a full kettle up to my room and plugged it into the socket behind the bedside drawer. Mom shouldn’t notice that it was gone; she preferred wine at this time of night.

Mom called up the stairs. ‘Are you ready for bed, love?’

‘Yeah,’ I shouted.

‘Do you want me to come up and read you something?’

I hesitated. Mom hadn’t read to me in a long time, not since I began to read by myself. I looked at the copy of *The Hobbit* on top of my bedside drawer, then glanced at the kettle beside the bed, the row of stones I’d lined along the windowsill. ‘No, it’s okay.’

‘Alright, sleep well, love.’

‘Night,’ I shouted.

As I closed the bedroom door, I listened for any creaks or groans from the stairs. Instead I heard the TV begin to mumble and the fridge slap shut. Satisfied, I walked to the kettle and flicked the on-switch. I double-checked my schoolbag beneath the window, full with spare rocks in case the Viking decided to lay siege rather than retreat. The small knives and forks were lined-up beside the rocks on the windowsill, and the sword lay on my bed, clashing with the moonlight.

I tried to imagine the hotel where Dad was staying while I waited for the Viking to arrive. I pictured a tall building with confusing hallways that all looked the same, blinking lights, and a doorman that never smiled. As I thought about it, I saw Vikings – not the new kind, but the original, axe-swinging type – push past the doorman, trampling him beneath them. They swarmed into the reception area, howling with blood-lust. The receptionists tried to run away, screaming, but they were downed with sharp blades and arrows. I saw Vikings stumble out of rooms, carrying gold and money and pills. Others carried torches and flung them into rooms full with people. I thought of Dad upstairs, unaware of the danger. Then I was running towards the staircase, avoiding the outstretched hands of Vikings, the swipe of their swords. Arrows chased me up the stairs. ‘Dad, Dad,’ I shouted as I ran along one of the hallways. Lights flickered overhead and behind me I heard Vikings curse. Smoke filled the air. ‘Dad? They’re here, Dad. They’re here.’

When I woke, both my hands were clutching the handle of the sword. I sat up on the bed and wiped my eyes. A part of me felt the hours that had past, and knew I was too late to stop the Viking from invading our settlement. I looked out the window; the Viking’s car was docked outside our front gate.

I tip-toed to my bedroom door and opened it. Light stretched up the stairs, but I couldn't hear any sound or movement: the house seemed to be sleeping, or dead. A sudden giggle from my parents' bedroom. I snuck closer, careful to avoid the part of the landing that squeaked if you stepped on it. Two voices, both recognizable. Mom let out another laugh and shushed herself. Her attempts to fend off the Viking had turned more desperate. She must be planning to read him a story. That was dangerous. What if the Viking didn't like the story? I considered running back to my room, fetching my sword and meeting the Viking in battle. But that was risky too. What if I injured Mom by mistake? She'd be too close to the fight. Now that the Viking was inside, I couldn't drop rocks or boiling water on him neither. As I returned to my bedroom, I wondered what else I could do. I walked to the window and picked the pointiest rock from the sill. I felt its edges as I stared out the window.

I smiled. What did Vikings need more than anything? Their ships. Without them, they couldn't get anywhere, couldn't kill or pillage as they pleased. Maybe the Viking would be so sad at the loss of his ship that he wouldn't return?

I grunted at the weight of the schoolbag on my back; the rocks just about fit. Sword in hand, I crept out of the bedroom. As I passed my parents' room, I heard grunts and soft groans. It didn't sound as if the Viking liked the story much. Outside, the moon gawked at me. I shivered as I took the schoolbag off my back and placed it next to the car, dirt and bits of gravel stuck to the soles of my feet.

I started by aiming wide swipes and fierce stabs at the wheels with my sword. When that didn't work, I picked one wheel and began to saw. I glanced around as I cut. No neighbours seemed to be awake at this hour. A sharp hiss and the car slouched forward. By the time I'd cut the four wheels, it looked like the car was sinking into the ground.

As I stepped back to admire my work, a sudden hot feeling crashed out of me. This wasn't enough; there needed to be more. So much that he would never come back. I climbed onto the bonnet of the car and dragged the schoolbag up with me. I unzipped the bag and rocks spilled out, scratching the red paint. I pulled the largest rock from the bag – it took both hands – lifted it overhead and flung it at the windscreen. It bounced away and fell onto the road, but left a satisfying crack in the shape of a lightning strike. I picked up more rocks and flung them, each one leaving its mark.

A glance to my right let me see the light in my parents' room snap on. I sprang down from the bonnet and began to run around the car, flinging stones as I went. On my second lap, the front door opened and the Viking sprinted out, shouting in his strange Viking language. Behind him, Mom stood in her dressing gown, screaming at him to come back, he's only a child; he doesn't know what he's doing. As the Viking ran towards me, I picked my sword off the ground and let out my battle cry.