

There is no light of any kind. Not once I shut the hatch door.

The alarm sounded just before the end of lunch. We all knew the lockdown siren: it's quite different from the evacuation siren they use for a fire or some other kind of emergency. A series of rising tones. It sounds like something from a video game, or a cheap car alarm.

But we all knew what this alarm meant. Whole School Lockdown. Go to your classroom or designated safe area. Lock the doors, turn out the lights, hide in the cupboards or under the desks until the all clear is given. The all clear is a much lower, continuous tone.

The lockdown alarm is only used when there is some kind of immediate danger to students. Like a wild animal on the school grounds. Or some criminal with a gun.

We've done lots of drills, and my first thought was that this was just another drill. But they always announce drills, so that we know when it's for real.

This is for real. There is a real threat of some kind loose on the campus. Worse, I've got a horrible feeling the person's looking for me.

I could have gone to my classroom, which is my designated safe area. I was nearby. But if it is Daniel looking for me then that's exactly where he'll look.

So now I am crouched in a small wooden compartment under the stairs that lead down to the basement of the Design and Technology block.

I don't know that Daniel is actually looking for me, but there's a chance. He's one of those loner, loser kids. The kind that everybody ignores. The kind that don't fit in because they are always trying too hard.

I don't fit in either, but I don't care. I'm bigger than just about any other kid at this school and they do what I tell them to. That's how middle school works. You only have to bash a few kids to earn the respect of all the others. Then they do what you want. Sure it costs a few detentions and a couple of suspensions, even a threat that they'll expel me, but they can't really do that. Not unless I commit some actual crime. Bring drugs to school, something like that.

But somewhere along the way Daniel and I have crossed paths and crossed swords. It's not about the

doughnut. Yeah, he had a doughnut in his lunch bag, and, yeah, I wanted that doughnut. It looked nice. But it's not about the doughnut. It's about respect. By refusing to give me the doughnut he wasn't showing me respect.

So I grabbed it off him anyway. But the little moron spat on it, just as I was about to eat it. He *spat* on it!

So I had to teach him a lesson about respect. I had bruised knuckles for days. I was fully expecting another suspension, but he never told anyone. Nobody saw, because he'd been sitting out in the old hall by himself. Didn't have any friends. So he got a lesson in respect, and I got away with it.

Until now.

I could be wrong. Maybe he's not looking for me. Whatever – I'm keeping right out of his way.

I know about this hiding place because I'm always getting asked to help put stuff away, on account of my size. Some of that stuff has gone in the cupboard underneath the D&T basement stairs. One day when I was putting away a couple of boxes for Mr Telfort, who teaches engineering design, I saw the panel on the back wall of the storage cupboard and wondered what it was. When I pushed on one side it sprang up, some kind of magnetic spring clip, and it opened into the area under the landing.

To get to the D&T basement you go down one flight of stairs to the landing, then down another flight

to the basement itself. This hinged panel, a kind of hatch, must have been put there in case they needed more space for storage. I don't think it had ever been used because the area under the landing was completely empty and covered in cobwebs.

I didn't think much about it at the time, although it occurred to me that it would be a good hiding place, so I didn't tell anybody else about it.

Then a few minutes ago, the lockdown siren sounded. I was taking a pee in the toilets at the back of F block, where my form class is. I ran out into the corridor to see people scattering in every direction. Felicity Cordina, we call her Felix, charged right into me and just about bowled me over. And that took a lot of doing for someone as small as her.

'What's going on?' I said.

'Daniel Curnow!' Felix said, wide-eyed, terrified. 'He's flipped out!'

I hadn't heard anything, but the toilet area is made of solid concrete block walls and it faces the playing fields. Anyone could fire a bazooka at the front of the school and you wouldn't hear it.

'What's he doing?' I said.

'I don't know nothing else!' Felix shouted.

She scampered off down the corridor without saying anything else, and although that seems like

a strange word to use, it really did seem to describe the way she walked. It was as if she couldn't decide whether to walk calmly, like they always told us to do in fire and lockdown drill, or to run for her freaking life. I was torn between the official instructions, to go to my designated safe place, or to go to my own personally designated safe place.

It all depended on what Felix meant by 'flipped out'. I decided to go to my own, private place. Somewhere Daniel would never find me.

I ran along the corridor to the covered pathway, checked quickly around to make sure that he wasn't in sight, then sprinted across to Design and Technology, where classroom doors were already slamming shut in my face and ran down the stairs to the basement.

So here I am, crouching in the dark under the stairs, in pitch blackness with the feeling of old cold cobwebs on my face and in my hair. Still I feel safe. I don't think Daniel knows this place exists. Even if he does, he doesn't know that I know about it. It'll take him a long time to find me here. And the cops will be swarming all over the place by then.

There's light outside in the main cupboard, usually a trickle from the gap under the door. But the hatch blocks all of that. Not even a cat or an owl would be able to see anything in here.

But I can hear things.

Upstairs I hear doors slamming.

For a few minutes there are running footsteps, but then nothing as those kids reach their safe places.

It's silent, except for the sound of my own breathing echoing off the walls.

Silence.

Pitch black.

I feel deaf and blind.

This space is only a few metres wide by a couple of metres deep, but it seems much smaller. In the darkness, the walls really do seem to close in.

I can't hear anything outside. No shouts, no screams. Sirens. Where the hell are the cops? Where the hell is Mr Merton, the school security guard?

Maybe this is all some elaborate drill. Maybe I forgot to read the school notices last night and I missed the announcement. What about Felix? Did she miss it, too? Or was she playing a part?

'I don't know nothing else.' If she didn't know nothing, that meant she knew something.

Like Miss Anglesea, our English teacher says. *There's a world of difference between 'Let's eat, Grandma' and 'Let's eat Grandma' . Commas save lives.*

But in this case it was a double negative. *Don't never use a double negative!* Miss Anglesea says.

Yeah I know what a double negative is. Just because I'm big and like to push people around, doesn't make

me stupid. I didn't always used to be big. And when I was small, other kids used to push me around. So it's all like karma or something.

Neil Armstrong, when he landed on the moon, left out an 'a' and turned a world-shaking speech into grammatical nonsense. *One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.* What he was supposed to say was 'One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.' In other words a small step for him, but a huge leap forward for the human race. But he forgot the 'a'.

(I know NASA tried to claim he did say it, and it got lost in the static, but I've heard the audio. He never said it.)

I look at my watch to try to tell the time. It's too dark to see. It's supposed to have little glow-in-the-dark dots on the hands and numbers, but I can see nothing. Useless watch. Nana gave it to me. She can have it right back when this is all over. I'm getting a digital one with a button to light it up. Or one of those new iWatches if I can afford it.

I came in here just before 1. I know that because it was almost the end of lunchtime. I guess it's been about ten minutes, but it's really hard to tell. If I'm right, that means the cops will be here, or at least nearly here. They'll sort Daniel out.

Distant sirens now. Lots of them. Police, fire, ambulance, the whole collectors set. Thank God.

More sirens. As they arrive, they shut off. I can hear footsteps. Slow, deliberate. On the steps above my head. Whoever it is comes down, looks around, then climbs back up.

Silence.

I think the silence is scarier than the footsteps. At least you have an idea where he is.

Something touches my leg and I jump, but don't yell. If I make noise, then I am inviting in whatever's out there, as surely as if I painted big, hi-vis arrows on the floor saying, 'This way to Gary Masters'.

There are shouts now from somewhere upstairs and outside. The shouts are drifting in through the open windows of the D&T block, down the stairwell. They're faint, but clear.

'This is the police.'

Thank God! They're here and coming in. This'll all be over soon.

More footsteps now. Closer. This is unbelievable. I'm no longer scared.

'Police!'

I'm trying to make sense of the world. I think I can hear fire. No, no that's just my imagination. I'd smell smoke and feel the heat if the building was on fire.

But what if it is? What if I am trapped in the basement of a burning building with this psycho still roaming around somewhere above me?

The police voices fade and in the absolute silence that follows again I hear the crawling of insects. I hear the echo of my breathing. I hear – nothing else.

This is hell.

What did they say about hell? Something about a bird pecking at the top of a mountain, and when the entire mountain is gone that's just the first second of the first minute of the first hour of your first day in hell. Something like that, anyway.

Father Christo, who we all call Father Christmas, thunders on about our sins in chapel once a week. I've always dismissed it as religious mumbo jumbo, not too far removed from witchdoctors and shamans. Perhaps I should have listened a bit more closely.

Footsteps again, in this building. I can hear them above me. It's got to be Daniel. Where are the cops?

Someone is definitely in the D&T building above me.

Wait. That's not my breathing I can hear echoing off the walls. There's someone else in here with me!

It's him. Has to be. It's Daniel. He's got in somehow!

Okay, get a grip. Daniel's upstairs, I just heard a footstep. I never thought I'd be so glad to hear a footstep. It's close, but not too close. Not *in-here-with-me* close.

But someone or something is.

I hold my breath and can still hear breathing.

I've got to know. I don't want to know, but I have to. It's worse not knowing.

I ease forward, feeling out in front of me. Nothing. I turn and crawl slowly into the wedge-shaped area under the lower stairs.

It'll be Daniel, all right. His eyes glowing, poisonous spiders spewing from his mouth and his breath a black cloud of venom.

It isn't Daniel.

There's a tiny squeak as my hand closes on a shoe. A girl's shoe.

'Pleath don't hurt me,' comes a soft whisper.

It's Lucy Simons from Year 7. I think. It's hard to tell from the whisper, but I'm sure it's Lucy. Lucy has a pronounced lisp. How cruel is that? And with a surname like Simons.

Right now she's thinking I'm the villain. The monster. Bad guy.

'Is that you, Lucy?' I say.

I hear the intake of breath as she opens her mouth to scream, but just then there are footsteps again on the staircase above us.

'Sssshhh,' I say desperately. 'It's Gary from Year 9. Be quiet!'

She understands, I think. At least she doesn't scream. The wooden stairs above us creak.

He's on the landing now. Only wooden floorboards separate us from him, standing so near us.

'Hey, is anyone here?' That's Daniel's voice. 'Hello?' Silence.

'You can come out now, it's safe,' he says. 'They got him. It's all clear now.'

If anyone else is down here, I hope they believe him about as much as I do, which is about as much as I can stuff pineapples up my nose.

Lucy isn't quite the cynic that I am. Or maybe she doesn't recognise Daniel's voice, or maybe she doesn't know that he's flipped out. She starts to move. I grab her arm to stop her and again hear that terrifying intake of breath as if she's about to scream.

I clamp my hand over her mouth and breathe a tiny 'Sssshhhh!'

I think she understands. She catches on quick and sits back down.

The door to the storage cupboard opens. I hear the sound of the handle and the squeak of the hinges. The snap of the light switch just inside the cupboard door. Still no light sneaks through the hatch.

That thin plywood panel is all that's standing between us and the monster.

I've just peed my pants. I can feel it running down between my legs. Warm and wet. I can't believe I just did that. Oh God, now I can smell it. I bet Lucy can, too.

Why am I even worried about that? There's something much worse to worry about.

I suddenly think of something else. My parents have probably heard about the lockdown by now. They'll be trying to call me to make sure I'm okay. My phone's in my locker, so no problem there. But what about Lucy? We're supposed to leave our phones in our lockers, but a lot of kids don't. They just switch them to silent. But even when on silent some of them still buzz quite loudly.

Does Lucy have a phone? I should have asked her. But now I don't want to talk, not with a cardboard box and a thin sheet of plywood the only things between us and oblivion. I just have to pray that she left hers in her locker as well.

Damn! Her parents will be calling, too. Of course they will. Is her phone off? I've got to know.

I move closer to her and touch her gently on the arm. She stiffens and draws away, but then relaxes, just slightly. I edge close to her until I can put my mouth right next to her ear. Then I whisper in a non-voice, too soft to be heard by anyone who doesn't have my lips glued to their ear.

'Phone off', is all I say.

I can feel her nodding.

All good.

Unless Daniel knows about the hatch and opens that door.

There's complete silence again. I think Lucy's stopped breathing. So have I. Even the cockroaches have stopped moving.

I see nothing. Hear nothing. But somewhere, a couple of steps away, stands a troubled kid who hates me.

We wait.

Lucy slips a small breath. If I can hear it, can Daniel?

Still nothing.

He seems to decide.

The light outside flicks off. The door shuts.

I hear his footsteps on the lower stairs, the landing, the upper stairs, and now he's somewhere above us in D&T.

Now there's another voice in the corridors on the first floor above us.

'Oh no!' It's Miss Anglesea's voice. What's she doing in D&T? Her classroom's over in the Arts block. Why isn't she in lockdown? Did she get caught somewhere and is she trying to sneak away?

'Oh God no!' She screams and there's the sound of running footsteps.

Then Daniel's voice again. 'Come back! Come back here!' He yells the 'B' word over and over at the top of his lungs.

His footsteps move further away.

There's a touch on my arm and instinctively I know what Lucy wants. I move closer to her and put my arms

around her, as if by hugging her, somehow I'll make her safe. I'll make this all go away.

It won't help.

But it does help. It helps me.

'How did you know about this place?' I whisper.

'You told me,' she says.

'I never.'

'Well you told Adam, he's my brother, and I was walking right next to him,' she says.

Damn. I told Adam. Of course I told Adam. I remember now.

Has Adam told anyone else? Has he told Daniel?

'Who is it, do you know?' she asks.

'Daniel,' I say. 'Daniel Curnow. Do you think Adam would have told him about this place?'

'I don't know. I don't know him.'

No, Daniel Whogivesadamn. One of those invisible kids.

'But I hate him,' she says. 'He's a bully.'

'Yes.'

Then I realise what she's just said and a cold feeling runs down my spine.

Most of the kids in Year 9 probably think I'm a bully. Actually, I guess I am a bully.

Sobering thought.

I'm sitting in the blackness, comforting a frightened girl, who's comforting me, facing the fact that

I'm not a nice person. I mean I always knew that, but somehow now I'm seeing it from a different perspective.

I'm smart enough to know that I'm better than that. That I could be better than that.

For some reason that thought makes me honest.

'I think he's looking for me,' I say. It might not be true, but I think it is.

'Why?' In that one word Lucy brings down a whole universe of guilt onto my shoulders.

It takes me a while to answer. I'm crying now. 'I - I wasn't very nice to him.'

'If it's what you want, you should go and talk to him,' Lucy says.

'Yeah, but he'd kill me.'

'Don't be silly,' she says with all the innocence of Year 7. 'But he's hurting everyone. Because of you.'

She's young. Stupid. She doesn't understand.

Or maybe she does. Better than me.

If he came to school looking for me, and he finds me, maybe that'll end it.

I don't move.

I don't say anything. I pretend I didn't hear her.

Running footsteps above us again.

And shouts. The cops have found a way back into the school. Have they? Someone has.

It's not the cops. It sounds like Mr Merton, the

Brian Falkner

security guard. Where the hell was he when this whole thing started?

Okay, at least he's here now.

There's more shouting from upstairs, right upstairs, real close by, like just at the top of the stairs.

There's a thud on the stairs, then another.

Thud, thud, thud, bam. Someone's fallen down the stairs and face-planted on the landing.

I know what's going to happen before it happens.

I start to move my hand, to clamp it over her mouth, to stifle the scream that I can feel welling up inside her little chest. But I'm too late.

She tries to stop it, too, and it's only a half-scream, choked off almost immediately by my hand.

But I hear it. Which means he hears it. Whoever is still alive in the stairwell above us.

Footsteps now. Slowly descending.

One step after the other in agonising slow motion.

The sound of the outer cupboard door opening.

The sound of a cardboard box being pushed aside, scraping across the cupboard floor.

The click of the magnetic latch.

Then the hatch opens.



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