

CHAPTER SAMPLER



BOOK OF SCREAMS

JEFF SZPIRGLAS

illustrated by
STEVEN P. HUGHES


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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS



For Danielle, Ruby and Léo—and that vial of
mysterious liquid that all my ideas come from —J.S.

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THE TAR



Benjamin's newest birthday present was expensive, and according to his parents, he was not meant to play with it often, if at all.

It was one of those flying drones that you could manipulate to move up and down and from side to side. It was way better than the kite Benjamin used to have when he was a little kid. You had to *work* to get a kite up in the air, but a drone? Touch a button, and the sky was the limit.

It wasn't long before Benjamin was able to connect a camera to the bottom of the drone, so that when he flew it up in the air, it could give him an aerial shot of whatever it was hovering above. From his base out in the backyard, Benjamin could control the movements of the drone, sending it over the tall cedar trees lining the fence and up into the air high above. From here he could watch the footage on his laptop computer, *last year's* birthday's present.

For a while he amused himself with images from above. He could see details in the treetops that he'd never noticed before, like the nests of birds, or, if he moved the drone just a bit higher into the sky, details from other people's backyards.

Wow, the Smiths next door had already opened up their pool! Mrs. Smith was busy swimming lengths back and forth, making big, heavy splashes. She stopped her swimming and looked up at the drone hovering above her, then shook her fist angrily.

Benjamin smiled. *Ha-ha!* He was the king of his domain from here. He could move the drone around and see what everybody within its 500-yard radius was up to.

He pushed the drone around the neighborhood, pretending he was in some remote army bunker buried under Washington, DC. At the press of a button, he would deploy his arsenal of weaponry and destroy whatever he saw fit.

"What are you doing, Benjamin?" his mom called from inside.

"Just playing with my birthday present," he said, turning to her.

"Oh," he heard her say from behind the screen door. "Glad you're enjoying it!"

He heard nothing further from her as he continued to push the drone around, seeing how high it could go before he got a warning signal on his computer that he was pushing the drone to its limits.

Once he'd exhausted these opportunities, he wondered where else to take it. What was worth spying on in the surrounding yards?

Benjamin stood up, tracing a mental map of the area around him. The strip mall was at least a mile or two down the road. The ravine was close by, but the treetops wouldn't yield anything of interest. In fact, the only big building in walking distance he could think of was the school.

"Hey," he said to himself, chewing on the idea. He'd never seen the roof of the school before. The caretakers were the only people who ever went up there—didn't there used to be two? Now it was just Mr. Erikson. As far as Benjamin was concerned, the school rooftop was up there with the far reaches of space and the depths of the Mariana Trench as a region that only an elite few could explore.

Until now.

Benjamin adjusted the controls of the drone, piloting it back up into the air, past his backyard, across two streets and over the fence separating the road from the expanse of the schoolyard. He pushed the drone higher into the air, so that his view of the schoolyard almost resembled the one from Google Maps that his teacher, Mr. Barry, had shown the class for their cartography assignment.

He pushed the drone farther across the field, and the rectangular outline of his bird's-eye view of the school loomed into view on his laptop monitor.

Then a warning light appeared on his controls. He was near the end of the drone's range. Benjamin bit his lip. He wouldn't be able to pilot the drone all the way to the other side of the school, but if he pushed it up a bit higher, the field of view might widen to include the whole rooftop.

He activated the controls and the drone went up, allowing him a better perspective.

Sure enough, he began to see several colored balls dotting the gray surface, presumably ones that had been kicked up there and left to bake in the sun.

He remembered that time back in second grade when he'd been bouncing one of those rubber Super Balls from the vending machine, and after, like, six bounces, it had cleared the top of the school, never to be seen again.

Heck, for all Benjamin knew, it was still there now.

He tried to recall where he'd been playing all those years ago. Was it toward the side of the school in the drone's range?

"Yes," he found himself saying. It was amazing that he could remember an isolated incident like this but not important information that Mr. Barry might want him to regurgitate on a test, or the list of chores his parents gave him on a weekly basis.

He pushed the drone closer to the spot where he'd lost the ball all those years ago. It had been bright red. It would surely be seen amid the litter on the dull gray of the rooftop.

The drone was still quite high in the air, not low enough to pick up any minute details. He'd begun to lower it, so it was hovering closer to the rough gravel covering most of the rooftop, when he spied a flash of something white. Something long and jagged...

"No," he said to himself as he quickly lost sight of the object.

He backed up the drone, trying to find it again.

Benjamin squinted at the image on his laptop. He leaned in closer. There was something lying on the roof of the school. It wasn't one of the soccer balls that had been kicked up there and left forgotten. It wasn't even that red bouncy

ball he'd lost years ago. It wasn't the gravel or sticky tar that coated the rooftop. It was something different. Something white. Something that looked almost...human.

What *was* it?

He shook his head. It couldn't be. Was there someone on the roof? A caretaker maybe? But it was Sunday.

And besides, the thing on the roof wasn't moving. It couldn't be a person!

Benjamin strained to get a better look. He had to bring the drone down even closer to get the detail he wanted.

The drone roved over the rooftop, showing old food wrappers and stray leaves and splotches of tar. But there was no large white object. Nothing he could see from this angle anyway.

Maybe if he floated the drone farther up into the air and got yet another high-angle view, he could locate the object and then zoom back in.

Benjamin made a move to raise the drone, but it remained in place.

"C'mon," he grunted, fiddling with the controls. "Just a better view." He could take a snapshot on his computer monitor. That's all he needed, if only he could get some distance between the drone and the rooftop. But the device wasn't moving up. It wasn't even veering left or right. And then Benjamin's controller sent out another warning beep.

This time Benjamin looked at the screen. He saw rooftop gravel rushing up toward him and—

"No!" Benjamin growled, clenching his fists into tight balls. He was about to pound the laptop, but that would be two pieces of equipment destroyed.

Already the truth was dawning on him. He'd lost the drone to the school rooftop.

The very expensive birthday present he was supposed to take care of.

"Benjamin, time for lunch," a voice called from inside.

Benjamin snapped his laptop shut. *Cripes!* He was going to get it now. His parents had just given that drone to him on Friday, and he'd lost it already?

Oh, he was *going* to get it.

Unless...

Unless he could get up there somehow and find it.

He could do it tomorrow, after school, when there would be few people to spot him.

For the moment, in front of his parents, Benjamin could pretend to have lost interest in the drone momentarily and feign excitement about a bike ride outside. That would take him to Monday, and by the end of the day, he'd have the drone back.



Getting to the rooftop wasn't going to be easy, though. Maybe he could hide in the bathroom stall or something while all the other kids left. He knew that Mr. Erikson would be on his rounds, cleaning up the classrooms.

Benjamin would have to swipe the keys off the cart of cleaning supplies Mr. Erikson wheeled around. He could do that when the caretaker was in one of the rooms wiping down the desks. He probably wouldn't even notice the keys were missing, because most of the teachers kept their rooms

open after school, and that would give Benjamin time to get to the metal ladder that led up to the hatch by the rooftop. He'd find the key to open the lock, then pocket it.

He would completely ignore the *NO ADMITTANCE—DANGER* sign on the hatch, push it open and get an awesome view from up there. Finding the drone would be easy because it was big and gray and he knew exactly where it had landed.

So on second thought, this *was* pretty darn easy.

A few minutes later Benjamin found himself on the ladder, keys in hand. It did take a few tries before he found the right key for the lock, but once he did, it snapped open. Benjamin pocketed the key. Now he just had to get the hatch open.

That was more of a trick.

For one thing, the hatch was heavy, and Benjamin was weak.

He tried heaving on it first with big heavy pushes, but that just got him tired and upset. So he put his shoulders against the hatch and started to walk up the ladder, using his weight and legs to do the pushing. Benjamin pushed with his shoulders, heaving on the hatch with all of his weight, until finally the heavy door flipped over with a loud clang. Benjamin gave a satisfied smile.

He wouldn't have long, but he didn't need much time.

He pulled himself up and through the open hatch, and swung around to touch down on the gravel of the rooftop. In front of him was a wide, flat expanse, dotted with several chimney vents that belched steam from exhausts elsewhere in the building. Beyond he saw the rooftops of nearby houses.

He focused on scanning for his prize.

There. At the far end of the rooftop, hidden under a clump of leaves, was the drone.

Benjamin wasted no time. He dashed past the deflated soccer balls and dirt-brown tennis balls, his feet crunching over the gravel until he was nearly at the edge of the roof. Benjamin peered over the precipice and felt a wave of dizziness as he saw the pavement two stories down. He held his hands out to steady himself, then crouched to retrieve his prize. *Got it!*

“What are you doing there?” a voice called out from behind.

Benjamin turned to see a lanky, bearded man in torn coveralls, the kind of man he’d normally steer clear of on the street. Mr. Erikson, the caretaker, had followed him up here.

“Uh...” Benjamin began, trying to think of an excuse.

“Did you take my keys?”

“Uh...”

“To get up here?”

“Uh...”

Mr. Erikson shook his head. “All those hours learning in this place, and you only have one-word answers? Technically *uh* isn’t even a word, kid.”

“Uh...sorry?”

Mr. Erikson fixed Benjamin with a steely gaze.

“Uh...sorry, *Mr. Erikson*,” Benjamin said.

“Why are you here?”

“I had to get my drone.” Benjamin held it up to show that he wasn’t lying.

“You could have asked.”

“You would have said no.”

Mr. Erikson considered this. “It’s a long drop to the pavement.”

“I know. But I’m being careful. I won’t go over the edge.”

“Kid,” Mr. Erikson started, then paused. “What’s your name?”

“Benjamin.”

“Benjamin, listen to me. Listen very carefully. You’re in a lot of danger.”

“Don’t you mean *trouble*?”

“Benjamin, I’m going to ask you to come back here—”

Benjamin lowered his head and sighed. Oh, he was going to get it. First from Mr. Erikson, then his parents, and who knew what punishment each was going to dole out? He took a step forward, and—

“STOP!”

Benjamin looked up. Mr. Erikson was still standing near the hatch. He was holding his hands out so the palms were facing Benjamin. His eyes were wide and fearful.

“I’m not going to fall over the edge, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That’s *not* what I’m worried about, kid.”

“It’s Benjamin.”

“Don’t take another step forward, Benjamin.”

Benjamin stopped. He looked down. He was about to step onto tarry blacktop. He didn’t understand. He’d walked across it to get this far. But he stepped back onto the portion of the roof that was just gravel and regarded Mr. Erikson quizzically. He wasn’t sure what to say, but Mr. Erikson didn’t seem angry. He seemed scared.

“Okay,” Mr. Erikson said. “I don’t want you to move until I tell you to. And I’m going to need you to walk along the edge of the rooftop—really carefully. You got it?”

“Yeah,” Benjamin said, not sure what Mr. Erikson was going on about.

“This is the most important part. You hearing me, Ben?”

“It’s Benjamin.”

“DON’T STEP IN THE TAR.”

A cool breeze blew across the rooftop. Benjamin looked down at the tar that had been spread across the roof. Most of the roof was covered in it now. There was only a narrow pathway of gravel along the edges where Benjamin was currently standing, stupidly clutching his drone to his chest, that led around the rooftop. It reminded him of those games he used to play as a little kid, when you pretended that only a few objects around you were safe, and the rest of the ground was lava that would burn you to a crisp.

“What happens if I step in the tar?”

“Don’t step in the tar, whatever you do,” Mr. Erikson repeated, looking away from Benjamin and at the roof around him. “I don’t think you woke it up.”

Benjamin decided it was best not to ask about the tar and just pretend it was red-hot lava. He’d played the lava game before—he could play it again.

Slowly, carefully, Benjamin edged along the narrow strip of roof where he didn’t see the black tar.

It took him a few minutes to reach the far corner of the roof. In the distance he could see houses and streets. He turned to Mr. Erikson, who was still standing by the open hatch. It seemed like the only exit—but wait. “What if we call the fire department? They can get a ladder up here, right?”

“There isn’t enough time,” Mr. Erikson said, and now Benjamin noticed that Mr. Erikson wasn’t looking in Benjamin’s direction. He was looking at a patch of roof somewhere in the open space between them.

Benjamin tried to follow Mr. Erikson’s sight line. “Don’t look there,” Mr. Erikson snapped, but it was too late.

Benjamin saw.

He *had* been right when he got that first view on his laptop screen.

There was the white object he’d seen. It had disappeared from view, but now it was back. It was moving in the tar.

It was a hand.

A hand without skin.

Just the bones, not quite white because there was still some connective tissue holding the individual bones together, and they were also stained from the tar.

But the hand was moving.

Why was it moving?!

Benjamin stood there, dumbfounded, not quite believing what he was seeing.

“Ben,” he heard a voice calling to him.

Benjamin snapped himself out of his thoughts. “It’s Benjamin,” he told Mr. Erikson.

“You’ve got to keep moving,” the caretaker said urgently.

Benjamin nodded. The hand was moving toward him. That wasn’t right. Hands couldn’t move by themselves. Not dead hands. Not hands disconnected from the rest of their body.

Then Benjamin got it. It wasn’t the hand that was moving. The hand was still stuck in the tar.

The *tar* was coming toward him.

He looked down, and he could see the tar pushing forward, lifting up off the roof so that little black tendrils were poking into the air. Trying to feel him out.

In his panic he dropped the drone right into the tar, and the tar raged around it, boiling like a frothing river, swallowing it up in one gulp.

That's when Benjamin screamed.

"Go. NOW!" hollered Mr. Erikson.

Ben had lost the drone, but it had confused the tar. It was still rippling around the inedible piece of metal and plastic. Trying to figure out where the flesh was. Trying to pull at it, dissolve it even.

A moment later Benjamin saw the tar pull away from the drone. It was bent out of shape, the propellers snapped in pieces, the plastic casing warped like it had been stuck in an oven.

Benjamin stared at it in horror.

"RUN!" screamed Mr. Erikson.

Benjamin was not an active kid by any means. The others in his class often made fun of him for his lack of physical ability. He'd always been the last one chosen to join pickup sports games outside at recess, if he was picked at all. He often felt pretty useless.

He wasn't going to be useless now.

He ran.

He stared at the narrow strip of untarred rooftop, stretching in a wavy line along the edge of the roof. It was growing narrower and narrower.

Benjamin jumped up onto the raised metal edge of the roof. He held his breath. One false step, and he'd plummet to the ground below. He held his hands out for balance, like

a tightrope walker might. He sucked in gulps of air, trying to keep alert.

Meanwhile, out of the corner of his eye, Benjamin could see the tar moving.

It had followed him. Maybe it could see. Maybe it couldn't. But Benjamin was pretty sure it could feel his movements. It knew its prey was within reach. He watched as the tar thickened in front of him. It had been spread so thin on the roof, but now it was pulling itself into something bigger. Thicker. With greater substance.

And it was growing.

The tar stretched itself into a shape. Bits of gravel and candy wrappers and even a few stray tennis balls were stuck to its surface, but even they moved around as the tar pulled and pushed itself like a ball of taffy. Benjamin could see how unlike tar it was. The black, shimmering surface of the oozing substance was too shiny, too malleable. Benjamin didn't know what it was or how it had gotten here. Nobody was allowed on the roof, and now he knew why.

The tar had become a large misshapen mound. It was rising up past the lip of the roof edge. It was growing taller. Snaky tendrils began to push out of it. Trying to reach him. Trying to grab him.

And then Benjamin saw something large and white push out of the tar and move toward him.

It was a human skull.

Benjamin screamed again. Tried to take a step forward, but the tar followed his movements. Took a step back. No luck. He just stood there, balancing on the edge of the roof. He whimpered.



Then...

“BENJAMIN, RUN!”

In a flash the tar retracted into a liquid puddle, with such speed that the skull popped out of the mound and hung suspended in the air for a moment before splashing back into the pool of black ooze.

The tar moved away from him.

Benjamin looked up.

It was Mr. Erikson. He was stamping his feet and waving his arms and looking with horror right into Benjamin’s eyes. “BENJAMIN, YOU’VE GOT TO RUN!!!”

Benjamin jumped off the ledge and back onto the roof. The tar was moving toward Mr. Erikson, who had stepped away from the hatch. He was skirting around it, luring the tar his way to distract it.

Benjamin looked down and saw he had some clearance now. He didn’t waste any time. He sprinted toward the open hatch.

It was still several yards away. He could make it, though. As long as he ran and didn’t stop or trip or—

His foot caught on something. He pitched forward. He felt his chest hit the jagged gravel. Felt the wind pulled from his lungs. Felt the sting of gravel on his hands, his cheeks. He weakly managed to look back.

He’d tripped on the rib cage of the tar’s other victim.

Benjamin screamed again, or tried to, but he was out of breath. Feverishly he sucked the air back into his lungs and tried to pull himself up off the gravel.

He looked around frantically. Where was the tar?

Shaking, he got back to his feet, still searching the roof in bursts so quick it was a wonder he could take anything in. Then, farther away, he saw.

Mr. Erikson was backed up against the edge of the rooftop.

The tar was oozing all around him.

Benjamin saw the look of horror on Mr. Erikson's face. Saw the inky black tendrils push out of the steadily growing mound and then latch on to Mr. Erikson's feet.

Mr. Erikson opened his mouth to scream, but the tar yanked him off his feet, taking the very breath from his throat before he could utter a sound.

Then Mr. Erikson was splayed on the roof, his arm desperately clawing over the edge, and the tar was upon him. He opened his mouth again. "BEENNNNNNN—" he started, but his cry turned to an agonized gurgle as the tar flowed over him like a wave.

Benjamin didn't scream this time. He was running for the hatch.

A few more steps. He could do it.

But the tar was already thinning out, flowing toward him.

Benjamin jumped for it. He grabbed hold of the hatch, pulling himself toward the ladder. Something latched on to his foot. He pulled harder. No. The tar wouldn't have him too.

Benjamin kicked, felt his shoe come off, and he was free! He slammed the hatch down, so the tar was back up there, trapped. He dug into his pocket, and yes! The key was there.

But the tar was trying to pull the hatch open. Trying to get inside after him.

With one hand holding the hatch shut, Benjamin struggled to click the lock shut, to turn the key and hold it tight.

Then, with the kind of speed that would have made him first pick on any of those recess games, Benjamin clambered down the ladder, landed hard on his feet and found himself back in the school hallway, shivering.

His hands were scraped and covered with cuts and scratches. He could feel a warm trickle running down his forehead and didn't need to look in a mirror to know he was bleeding in several places.

It didn't matter. He was *alive*.

Then the other realization. Mr. Erikson.

And the tar.

He could phone the police. That was the right step. It didn't matter that he'd stolen Mr. Erikson's keys and broken onto the roof. It didn't even matter that his birthday drone was trashed.

The thoughts ran through his head as quickly as he ran back home. He didn't turn back once to stare at the school. Not once to look at the rooftop. To see if there was any sign left of Mr. Erikson dangling over the edge.

That image remained burned in his head as he raced back to his house.

He didn't even stop to take his jacket or remaining shoe off until he was in his bedroom, with the door shut behind him. Then came sobs of horror and relief.

Mr. Erikson was gone. The tar had taken him.

A wave of revulsion came over Benjamin. His stomach spun. He'd never intended this.

Mr. Erikson was gone, and Benjamin was still here.

Tears flowed from his eyes, and ribbons of snot poured from his nose. He wiped his face with a sleeve, and then he slowly took off his dirty jacket, kicked off his shoe and collapsed onto his bed.

Benjamin closed his eyes. He squeezed them shut, trying to will himself to sleep, trying to convince himself that this was all just a terrible dream he was going to wake from.

But after a few moments, he heard a knock on the door, and behind it his mother's muffled voice. "Benjamin, is everything all right?"

Benjamin thought about how to answer her. Call the police? They wouldn't believe his story. And what if they did? What if they opened up the hatch on the roof, what then? They'd find Mr. Erikson, but the tar would find them. It would come back down through the hatch. Come after the police, after him.

"I'm okay," he called weakly.

"All right, honey," she said, her voice quieter. "I'm just making supper."

He heard her footsteps thump away, and then he was alone again.

He was going to have to get up and shower. He'd come into the house so quickly that his mother hadn't even seen him or the cuts and blood. He would have to explain. She'd demand it. The more Benjamin thought about it, the more he realized he was going to have to say *something*. When Mr. Erikson failed to show up at work, they were going to check the school cameras. They were going to find him and Mr. Erikson in the hallway. They were going to ask questions.

Benjamin exhaled.

He got up off the bed to go and clean himself up.

Then he stopped.

He saw it.

There, on the bottom of his shoe. Stuck to the sole.

It was only a dark splotch, but it was already oozing.

Benjamin froze. He could only watch as the tar pulled away from his shoe, poked out a tiny little tendril and disappeared into the thick fibers of his bedroom carpet.

He stood there, too afraid to move. To even breathe.

Because now the entire floor was lava.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND



Our substitute teacher, Mr. Edward, was a complete and utter jerk. I didn't say it lightly, but it was true. He was also the only substitute that Mr. Stevenson would hire.

I didn't know why. We kept telling Mr. Stevenson about Mr. Edward. How he shouted and banged his fist on the desk and made us stay in at recess if we got too loud. There was a reason Mr. Edward had never become a real full-time teacher, and it was that he was the *worst*.

Mr. Stevenson was our homeroom teacher. He was the best teacher I'd ever had. Why? He took the time to get to know us. He knew how much I liked science, for example. And building spaceships out of LEGO. He even remembered the details of all the stories he had us write for assignments. And he listened. Whenever there was a fight at recess, he had us sit in a community circle to hear both sides of the problem. Usually we

could come to some kind of agreement. Mr. Stevenson got our respect.

What I loved most about Mr. Stevenson was how much he tried to share his passion for science with us. He managed to get the science room for our homeroom. It was the one attached to the giant storage closet where the teachers kept all the old books and science equipment that never got used anymore. There were piles of dusty old encyclopedias but also cool stuff, like a real projector that you could turn on and use to show ancient educational films. Mr. Stevenson showed us one once, and we all laughed at it together.

The room also had equipment from back when our school went all the way up to tenth grade and they'd held high-school science classes here. The shelves had old beakers and Bunsen burners and even some chemicals stored in jars super high up on the shelves. We weren't allowed to touch the chemicals. I didn't think anyone had used them in years. They'd probably all gone bad.

"Why are you looking at the closet door, Robert?"

I shifted my glance from the closet over to the hulking figure of Mr. Edward. He had a smell about him that was hard to ignore. But if you could, you'd get lost in the thick tangle of his beard, which he probably kept to hide his skin, which was red and puffy like it had been soaked in a pickling vat. The whites of his eyes and his teeth had a yellow tinge, and his features were fixed in a permanent scowl. Right now his fists were clenched so tightly that the veins looked like they were going to pop right through the skin.

"I was just thinking of the answer," I muttered, trying to remember the lesson at hand.

SLAM!

I jumped, heart in my throat. Mr. Edward had smacked his fist against the desk with such force that it sounded like a thunderclap. He looked like he wanted to use that fist to pound against something softer than a desk, but I could see him thinking twice. Slowly he let out a long breath and unclenched. “Speak up, Robert,” he said at last, breaking the silence. “You know I can’t abide mumbles and whispers.”

“I-I was thinking of the answer—”

“Too late,” he snapped. “I’ll make a note of that.” Mr. Edward lumbered back to Mr. Stevenson’s desk and scribbled something down in a notebook there. If it had been any other substitute teacher, I’d have tried to sneak over and take a look, but I didn’t dare do anything with Mr. Edward in sight.

Crap. What kind of notes was he leaving about me now? Mr. Stevenson would see them, and he might not understand.



At first recess I went out to play soccer with Wajahat and Asir. When I went to take a shot, I ended up missing the ball completely and landing on my knee. I landed so hard that the dirt scraped off a layer of skin, and I started gushing blood. The sight of blood gets me screaming, and I totally embarrassed myself in front of everybody. I had to go limping into the school to get some gauze and bandages from the school nurse.

When I’d stopped crying, the nurse sent me back outside. I took my time because my knee still hurt super badly, and

also I didn't want to show my face to anyone right away. As I slowly hobbled down the long hallway, I went past our homeroom door.

The blind in its window hadn't been pulled down all the way, and there was a gap where I could see inside.

Mr. Edward was still at the desk, scribbling more notes, and I immediately ducked out of sight. I could hear him muttering under his breath even from out here.

What the heck was he writing now? I was suddenly filled with an urge to snatch the notebook and quickly flip through it.

Through the gap under the blind, I saw Mr. Edward get up and move over to the supply closet.

He turned a key, opened the door and disappeared inside. I could hear clunking and shuffling coming from the closet, like he was moving boxes or breaking things.

He was doing *something* in there, but he definitely wasn't coming out yet.

I checked my phone. Three minutes had gone by and he was still in there, and the cacophony kept on. There was no other way out. I was pretty sure of that. He was clearly doing something that was taking forever.

That's when the thought hit me. With Mr. Edward in the closet, I might have enough time to slip into our homeroom and see what the heck he was scribbling in his notebook. Only a quick glance before he locked it back up in Mr. Stevenson's desk. It would take only seconds, and Mr. Edward was clearly not coming out anytime soon.

I clasped my hand around the door handle and turned it. Quietly I opened the door just enough to get inside.

Heart hammering in my chest, I padded over to the desk. I could hear Mr. Edward in the closet. He was making a lot of noise. I had no idea what he would want in there, and I didn't care. As long as he was doing something, I had a chance to see what he was writing about all of us.

I looked at the notebook, but instead of notes, all I could see were big dark scribble marks. Not words at all.

I blinked. What?

I turned one page back, to the lesson plan for the morning. I scanned the typewritten notes for any mention of my name in the margins, but again, all I could see were huge dark squiggle marks. All over the page. It wasn't any kind of language, just a bunch of doodling. It looked like it had been scribbled firmly, with an angry hand.

I flipped back through a few more pages. Some had Mr. Stevenson's lesson plans in there. Neat and tidy. But other pages were crumpled and torn and full of more scribbles.

I knew they were all from Mr. Edward.

I shook my head. These looked like the scribbles of a wild thing.

Mr. Stevenson must have known about the notes. They were in *his* book of lesson plans. So why keep hiring Mr. Edward?

A shuffling sound came from inside the closet.

Crap!

I moved away from the notebook, turned and strode toward the door. It was only a few paces away, but my knee was hurting from getting skinned. It was slowing me down. If Mr. Edward saw me leaving, I'd be in such trouble—

“Robert!”

I stopped. I turned. I saw.

Impossible.

Mr. *Stevenson* stood before me. He was halfway between the closet and the desk. I could tell he'd come out in a hurry, because he was still in midstride. His shirt was buttoned up the wrong way, and it wasn't tucked in properly the way it usually was. His hand was outstretched toward me.

I froze in place. Mr. *Stevenson* looked from me to the closet to his desk, where the notebook pages had been turned back several days. I hoped he might not notice that it was open to a different spot but held my gaze on them for too long, because when Mr. *Stevenson* turned back to me, I could tell he knew I'd seen them. That it was a detail he didn't want others to see. He shifted his weight from foot to foot nervously.

For a moment neither of us spoke, and all to be heard was the ticking of the clock above the door.

Finally he broke the silence. "What did you see?"

"You—you came out of the room," I said, not understanding. "But *Mr. Edward* went in."

I tried to look over his shoulder. Was Mr. *Edward* there too? How could that be? There was no other way out of that supply closet.

Mr. *Stevenson* closed the closet door. "Mr. *Edward* has gone home. I am feeling much, much better now." He paused a moment, and his gaze went back to his desk. "I will take over for the rest of the day. We won't see Mr. *Edward* again for some time, I should think."

It was only then that I realized he had something in his hand. It was vial of greenish liquid. Shakily he picked it up and put it to his lips, downing the substance quickly.

There was something about the hand holding the vial. It was noticeably bigger than his other one—a mismatch.

Mr. Stevenson let out a cough, like whatever he'd sipped was sour.

I looked at him. "Are you okay?"

He slipped the vial, and his big hand, into his pocket and left them there, hidden.

"Mr. Stevenson?"

Then he burped suddenly and pulled his hand back out, putting it to his mouth.

"Excuse me," he said, but there was a strained look on his face. He put the other hand to his throat and swallowed once, twice. He closed his eyes, then blinked and opened them and stared at me again.

Both hands were the same size again.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I asked.

"Absolutely sure," he said after a moment. He flexed his fingers and slipped both hands into his pockets. As if everything was totally normal.



We were all pleased to see Mr. Stevenson again. Wajahat pumped his fist in the air and cheered, which Mr. Stevenson did not approve of, but we could all see the smile on his face.

He picked up the lesson that Mr. Edward had failed to complete, bringing us down to the carpet to teach. If it were any other teacher, we'd all complain about how sitting on the carpet was for kindergarten kids. Mr. Stevenson had taught kindergarten at his last school, the year before coming

to Gilmore P.S., and we just kind of took it in stride, even though with twenty-eight of us sitting cross-legged, there wasn't much carpet space for anyone.

I kept back from my usual spot at the front, settling in near the middle so I could blend in and think. I couldn't figure out how Mr. Stevenson had returned so quickly. How he'd emerged, like magic, from that closet. I had to know.

When the lunch bell finally rang, and we all sat down to eat at our desks, Mr. Stevenson came by before heading off to the staff room. "Hey, Robert. Can you help me clean up some of the art supplies after you're done eating?"

I looked up and nodded. "Sure. Can I see if Wajahat wants to help?"

"Wajahat wants to play soccer," Wajahat said. He liked to talk about himself in the third person, especially when he heard his name being tossed back and forth.

I shrugged. "I guess not."

After the bell rang and everybody put their lunches away, Mr. Stevenson returned as everyone spilled out of the room. I held back, until it was just the two of us left. He told me to wait at the door. Then he went into the room and emerged a little bit later with some papers tucked under his arm.

"Just wait here a moment. I won't be long. I need to deliver these down to Mrs. Watson."

I watched Mr. Stevenson stride off down the hall. Once he was out of sight, I went back inside. The notebook of lesson plans was gone, locked up in his desk.

I had a feeling the supply closet would be locked as well, but when I put my hand on the doorknob, it turned without a problem.

Had Mr. Stevenson forgotten to lock it when we'd met at first recess? It was likely. I'd caught him off guard.

It was ridiculous, but I had to get to the bottom of this. Mr. Edward had been in here. He'd gone in, but he hadn't come back out. At the back of my mind, I wondered, Was he still in there?

I opened the door and stepped inside. The closet was a mess. The boxes that usually were so neatly stacked were thrown about on the shelves. It looked like someone had let loose a group of curious orangutans.

But that's not what stopped me in my tracks.

I picked up one of the boxes, and that's when I saw them. More vials full of green liquid. The same stuff Mr. Stevenson had been drinking.

And in the box next to it?

Clothes.

Not just any clothes. I pulled out a pair of pants. They were the same dark pants that Mr. Edward had been wearing. I was sure of it.

I was also sure that this was not a place I should be found in right now.

I turned to leave, and that's when I heard the classroom door close. Darn! Mr. Stevenson would find me in the closet. I could explain it to him. Maybe not everything, but he would listen. That's what Mr. Stevenson did.

But a shadow fell across the open doorway. It was not Mr. Stevenson who entered the small, cramped room to join me.

"Mr. Edward..."

"Hello, Robert."

“You went home. Mr. Stevenson is back. He’s feeling better now. He said so.”

Mr. Edward nodded. “I know he did. But I’ve been called back for active duty.”

I looked at the space between Mr. Edward and the door. Could I slip past him?

I shook my head.

“Don’t worry. He left me detailed notes on how to...take care of you.”

I backed away. But Mr. Edward was now firmly between me and the door.

Mr. Edward moved closer. He reached into his pocket. He pulled out a vial of the green liquid. He turned it over in his hands.

“What is that?” I asked.

“This? I thought you might have figured it out. It’s my elixir. It’s what I take.”

I realized there wasn’t any way out of the closet. There was no secret exit that Mr. Edward had taken.

Oh no.

Mr. Edward. Mr. Stevenson.

They were the same person!

It was the green liquid that did it. But how?

I felt like Mr. Edward could read through my skull, right into my thoughts. “I take it every day. I don’t want to, but I have to.”

“You don’t have to take it. You can just be yourself,” I said, trying to pretend he wasn’t a horrible, unlikable person. “You don’t *need* to be him.”

“But I *am* him,” Mr. Edward said.

“Mr. Stevenson—”

“—is what I become when I drink the elixir. He is weak, and he whines, and he listens to those little fools. He says please and thank you and he goes out to staff dinners and he *drives me insane!*”

I shook my head. “No, that can’t be!”

“But I *have* to keep drinking to become him. You understand, of course, that if I don’t, they will come looking for me. The police are already suspicious. I have to move from town to town every year. It’s getting worse and worse. And the longer I go without drinking, the stronger I get. I will want to break things. Living things. I can snap and kick and crunch when I feel strong enough. There are so many things I can break.”

He stopped talking and looked at me, and there was a silence that lasted far too long.

Mr. Edward played with the vial in his hands. He looked at me. He took a deep breath. And another, like he was trying to calm himself down.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re going to turn back?”

But he shook his head. “It’s too late for that. You’ve seen me. You know what I am.”

“Nobody needs to know.”

“That’s right. They won’t.”

I looked at the gap between him and the door. Maybe, if I was lucky, I could slip past him. I looked at the shelf, grabbed one of the glass containers and hurled it at him. The glass shattered against his leg, and I ran. I sprinted like I was out on the soccer field. I felt my knee burn and bleed, but I kept going. Just a few paces, and I could slam the door and get ahead of him. Somebody would see me.

But then I felt his hand on my arm, pulling me back. Pulling me back and twirling me around so we were face-to-face. He was so much taller than me, and so much stronger. He pulled the stopper off the vial and thrust it my way. “Now be a good kid and drink up.”

I tried to turn my face away, but his hands were large and strong. They had a chemical reek that made me cough and sputter, and that was enough. Before I could draw another breath, Mr. Edward had jammed the vial into my open mouth. The liquid hit my tongue. The foul taste washed over me, and a moment later I could feel it burn.

My mouth! My mouth was ablaze!

I grabbed at my throat, trying to close it, trying to cough and eject the elixir back out at this monster, but Mr. Edward seemed to know what I would do. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. I gasped again, and the liquid went down. Well, some of it did. Some I did manage to cough back up into Mr. Edward’s face. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. Then he stared at me, grinning from ear to ear, and the crooked smile wouldn’t come off his face, like a kid had painted it on. “Won’t be long now,” he croaked.

I dropped to my knees.

The fiery sensation rushed down my throat. The contents of my stomach churned, and I leaned forward to retch once. Twice.

I clawed at the floor, threw my head back and let out a cry. But the voice I heard was not my own. It was lower and cracked, like someone had taken a recording of me and slowed it down. I put a hand to my throat, and it felt different too. Bigger. Thicker. The skin rough and bumpy,



like the skin you peel off the chicken before you eat the flesh.

I slammed my hands down onto the floor, but they weren't my hands. The knuckles were swollen, the veins big and pulsating.

I cried out again, and I could feel my mouth stretching larger. My jaw lengthening. The bones pushed out quickly, the pain stabbing all over my body. I screamed a scream and—

IT BURNS

HELLLP MEeEEEeEEE

Eeeeeeee

Eeee



I feel better now.

Like a milliun buksz.

Mr. Edword is in charje of klass today. Thats good.
Mr. Steeven Son is not our reel teecher.

Mr. Edword openz the door and I com into the room.
The other kidz see me and I see their eyes go so big. One of them points. Well, more like five of them point.

I see there fingerz. They are so small and week.

I can brake them off like toothpicks if I want.

I WANT I WANT I WANT—

But Mr. Edword sayz no.

Insted I make tight fists and breathe the way Mr. Edword told me too when I get that big feeling. He tellz mee to beehave in front of the others.

I TRY BUT I WANT TO BRAKE NOW!

Mr. Edword sayz we can close the door in a bit.

Mr. Edword haz lots more of that tastee drink in the closet.

He even sayz we can share it with the othur kidz.

Then we can all go out and play.

WEER GONNA HAV SO MUCH FUN!