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THE ADVENTURES OF LUKE.

BOOK 1: LUKE AND THE WITCH.

BY

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Word Count: 60,000

Dedication: To my Mother, Jean and my wife, Susanne.
Thank you!

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LUKE AND THE WITCH.

CHAPTER ONE

Once in a while the world changes because of something small, something so tiny that it would be easy to miss, to overlook or to ignore and something so insignificant that with the best will in the world you just wouldn't be able to see how important it was. That's usually how Luke felt. He wanted to be important. He wanted to change the world. But he was small and he knew it. That's how everybody made him feel anyway. People always seemed to pick on him including his own mother who always seemed to be shouting and making him feel like a speck of dust. So sometimes he hoped he got up her nose.

Luke lay in bed trying to get to sleep. Here he was, ten years of age and already with more problems than most. A couple of years ago his mother had taken him to see some people to try and figure out why he wasn't quite like other children at school. Others seemed to read faster, write faster and eventually the men in nice suits had told him he was dyslexic. Dyslexic? Luke certainly couldn't spell it, so that must be what it was. Even though he didn't really know how knowing a word like that was supposed to help.

He sighed and turned over. The pillow was cool against his

face. The sheets were cool. Everything was cool in this house. His mother seemed to have a morbid fear of the gas bill, as if it was a bad dose of the flu. Luke had had the flu, several times, and didn't believe any bill was as bad as that. But his mother always said she knew best, so he supposed she must.

Suddenly a sound came from across the hall. A groaning. Luke looked over to the open door of his bedroom and stared into the blackness. A bead of sweat formed against his brow. There it was again. A low guttural roar. Heavy. For a moment he continued to listen. It almost seemed that the groaning was getting closer. Slowly he began to draw the covers up to his face, over his nose. Was something moving towards him? He'd asked his mother to leave the hall light on, but as usual she hadn't. The electricity bill was due. There was always a bill that was due, but right now he would have walked the dog for a month for one tiny light in the hallway. Suddenly the groan got louder, angrier! Luke pulled the covers way above his head. If it was a monster, maybe it wouldn't see him. All the lights were off and it seemed to be in his mother's room. Perhaps it would leave him alone. Perhaps it was eating his mother, devouring her inch-by-inch, bones and all. He'd read a story about a monster like that. It had taken Luke nearly a month to read the story about a monster like that. Growl!! He curled up

into a ball underneath the sheets and screwed his face up tight. He didn't want his mother to die. He liked his mother really. But if she was the one the monster had picked, he really didn't know if he had the right to argue.

"Oh please don't come into my room monster," he thought. "Stay in Mum's"....Suddenly Luke had a horrific thought! What if he'd created the monster with his imagination? The one from the story made flesh with the power of his own brain. His mother had always told Luke that he had a powerful imagination, but he never dreamed that it could be this powerful. Even with a dead mother, he realized that it could be considered quite a talent.

"GROWL!!....GROWL!! GROWL!!....GROWL!!"....Luke wondered if he could imagine the monster away again, making it disappear back into the darkness. Luke thought very hard.

"GROWL!!"....He decided to think even harder...."GROWL!!" "Oh come on," he thought, "I can do this." He screwed his face up tight, tighter than he'd ever done before. Luke knew the wind may change and leave him with that face for ever more, but for the sake of his mother, who may still be alive and capable of making breakfast, he thought he ought to try. Veins began popping out of his head.

"GO AWAY MONSTER! GO AWAY MONSTER! YOU'RE NOT WELCOME IN MY MOTHER'S BEDROOM!!" Luke knew this was going to work if anything would. Even through the covers that were still over

his head, the power of his brain should be able to banish any terror he'd rather not see"GROWL!!"

"DAMN!!," he thought.

"OH SHUT UP KEVIN!!!" Luke recognized his mother's voice coming from her bedroom. She was alive. "STOP SNORING WILL YOU!," she said.

Luke breathed a sigh of relief. Kevin! Of course. Of course it was Kevin. Luke didn't know who Kevin was, but any monster with a name like Kevin couldn't be that scary. He gave a tiny giggle. Kevin snored. Mum would be pleased.

The following morning Luke woke early. He stretched up high as he always did because someone had once told him that it would make him taller. He scrambled into the clothes that lay on his chair, quickly brushed the sandy mop of hair on his head and dashed towards the toilet. He turned the handle and pushed, only to find it locked from the inside. That was odd. His mother would usually be in bed asleep at this time cuddling up to Ruth, their scruffy black terrier.

"MUM!" shouted Luke dancing on the spot. "Hurry up, I want to go". It always made the feeling worse if you were holding something in, but were refused permission to let it out, he thought, still jiggling.

"I'm not in there", his mother shouted from her bedroom. Luke swirled round to face her bedroom door.

"Then why is it locked", he shouted, completely forgetting

about Kevin for the moment.

"Because someone else is in there, stupid" his mother replied.

"But Mum, I need to go! Now!" Luke's jiggling was becoming a tango for one.

"You'll have to hold it!" His mother seemed to have a giggle in her voice, but he didn't find it very funny. "Kevin, hurry up!" his mother shouted. So Kevin was still here. Luke made a mental note to try and remember Kevin's name.

"Kevin!!" his mother shouted again.

"O.k.! O.k.! For heavens sake!" A gruff voice came booming out from behind the toilet door. Suddenly it swung open and a large bulky shape pushed past Luke roughly.

"All yours kid" said the shape and went back into the bedroom, slamming the door shut as he did. Luke managed to catch a glimpse of the big mop of black hair springing from Kevin's head and as he went. Luke thought it looked scruffy as he dashed into the toilet and locked the door. Scruffy and unkempt "and his voice didn't sound very nice either," he thought as he sat on the toilet. He wondered what Kevin did for a living? He wondered what he could do for a living with a big hairy mass growing out of his face.

After breakfast that morning Luke dawdled his way to school. He kicked a drinks can along the pavement, his hands stuffed firmly into his pockets. He always took a long time

to get to school, dragging his steps one by one until he turned the corner into the school gates, into the classroom and into 'Hell', as he affectionately called it. He'd asked his mother several times if he could be excused school.

"For how long?" she'd asked and knowing forever would sound a bit long he had plumped for "tomorrow, Mum, just until tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow never comes" she said "so you'll have to go today."

Luke cursed silently under his breath that his little ploy hadn't worked. Mum had once told him that he had to go to school until he was sixteen. Sixteen! Another six years. That was almost the same as forever. Six whole years of being called stupid by the other children. Six years of being laughed at when he didn't understand a word, or couldn't write one that every other child could. Being dyslexic was almost as bad as being one of the fat kids. Of course they were fat and some of them were a little smelly, but as they had said to Luke,

"At least we can spell!"

Luke guessed it didn't matter who you were, everyone probably had something they could be bullied about. He sometimes wished he were fat. At least then he could jump on the kids calling him names and squash them. 'Luke the Fat Avenger' had a better ring to it than just plain 'stupid!'

He didn't think he was stupid.

"One day I'll show them!" he thought as he kicked the can again, hard. This time, instead of clattering along the ground as before, the can shot in the air as if it had wings. The sun reflected off it as it spun in the air, and his breathe caught in his throat as he saw where the can was heading.

The Old Jepson House had the kind of look that even sunlight dare not touch. Black wrought iron gates held sway at the front of the long wide path that trembled its way up to the front door. The can seemed to shiver fearfully in mid air as it soared over the gates and clattered onto the concrete below. Luke ran away from the house as fast as his legs could manage.

Bobby Sampson, the most prolific bully in the school had once bragged about walking right up to the front door and pushing the bell before running away, but no one believed him. Of course no kid had the guts to tell Bobby Sampson that they didn't believe him, but still. Luke finally stopped running as he saw the school gates. For once he would be on time, which caused him to curse under his breath again. According to Luke's mother the Old Jepson House was still occupied by the last of the Jepson's, but he wasn't convinced. It was always so dark and even when the sun was shining he never saw a milkman deliver anything

there, so perhaps even the milkman was scared too. Nothing good had ever come from the Old Jepson House, they said. And now the Old Jepson House had driven him to school. Compared to how he felt when he ran away, with the hairs sticking up at the back of his neck, school almost seemed like the heaven we've all been promised. Almost.

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Later that day Luke sat looking out of the classroom window. The field outside was a whirl of activity as Class 2a had sports for the afternoon and he felt decidedly envious of the fun they all seemed to be having. Here he was in Class 2b as Mr. Jackson droned on about English, Luke's least favourite subject. Mr. Jackson was a tall man with ginger hair and a hooked nose. Rings of sweat had permanently stained the underarms of his shirts so that washing powder no longer had any effect. Luke wondered why he simply didn't buy some new shirts rather than face the constant barrage of whispering and teasing that always went on as he taught. Luke knew well enough not to say anything but to remain quietly in the corner as Mr. Jackson's face slowly got redder and redder as it always did. He would always seem to have a mini nervous breakdown usually about ten minutes before the bell went. He looked at Mr. Jackson whose face was already a slight crimson.

Outside Luke could see Bobby Sampson lumbering around the

track like an overweight giraffe, tall and ungraceless. Luke had once nearly beaten Bobby in a cross country run, only to have Bobby barge him out of the way as they had neared the finishing line. Luke had fallen over into a nettle bush out of sight of the crowd and Bobby had run on to be the hero, whilst he had picked himself up and finished fifth. Later that day his mother had plastered him in chamomile lotion for

the nettle stings, leaving him feeling all pink and deflated. Luke knew that if he were bigger he would have given Bobby a good punch on the nose, even though his mother had said violence never solved anything.

Outside, standing at the side of the track, in white pumps, navy blue jumper and a short navy skirt was Gemima Peachblossom, who, as everyone agreed was the most beautiful girl in school. Luke sighed, louder than perhaps he should. Gemima was with a group of other girls watching Bobby Sampson run around the track. They giggled and pointed every now and then, as girls often did. A habit that Luke hoped they grew out of as they grew older. Gemima looked radiant. She didn't point or giggle half as much as the other girls. And with the sun out high Luke could do nothing but sit and look on in wonder. He marveled at how Gemima's golden hair seemed to catch the light, something that the other girls were no doubt envious of, and how she seemed to be able to smile with genuine warmth, whilst the other girls just

grinned like angry rabbits. Even Bobby Sampson behaved well around her. He hardly hit anybody whilst she was around, and just as Luke contemplated how he could ask Gemima to be his bodyguard, Mr. Jackson's large hand slammed down onto his desk! Luke swirled around, his heart thundering and looked up into Mr. Jackson's red and angry face. A vein was popping out of Mr. Jackson's head. It pulsed. A whiff of stale sweat drifted into Luke's nostrils as Mr. Jackson put his face closer.

"I said turn around and face the front!" Mr. Jackson screamed

it out like he was in pain, far louder than Luke needed to hear him, considering Mr. Jackson's nose was about a millimeter away from his own. "What have I told you about looking out of the window? You are here to learn, not to look out of the window at Gemima." Everybody in the classroom began giggling at what Mr. Jackson had just said and Luke began to turn a dark crimson colour himself. He looked up at Mr Jackson but didn't say anything. Luke had already found that silence got you into far less trouble than the truth and in a far off recess of his brain he wondered if that was what school was supposed to teach you?

Mr. Jackson stooped forward again and looked into Luke's eyes

as though he were searching for something. The vein in his temple was pulsing like a toothache. As though the blood

inside no longer wanted to be a part of him. Slowly Mr. Jackson raised his arm and pointed behind him. He bared his teeth and growled "Get to the front! Now!!"

For a moment Luke didn't move. Being sent to the front of the class was a fate worse than death, because it meant you may actually have to stay there for the rest of the term. He realized this would mean Mr. Jackson's beady red eyes would be on him all the time. It would mean having to answer questions in the classroom in front of all the others. It would mean having to sit up there with all the swots who sat up the front because they wanted to and it would mean that his English lesson would now seem like an eternity rather than just a very very very very very long time.

"Get to the front!" Mr. Jackson's face was as red as it had ever been as Luke slowly rose out of his chair. He felt like he'd just had his last meal and was on the way to the guillotine and with one last tortured look through the window towards the freedom he craved, he trudged away from his desk and up to the front of the class. Luke heard a quiet titter from behind him as he sat down. Mr. Jackson raised his head as proudly as he'd ever done and said "And if anyone else fails to pay attention they can come to the front too. In fact you'll all be at the front if you don't pay attention."

Luke nearly giggled as he imagined everyone crammed towards

the front of the class but just managed to stifle it in time. His day had already been bad enough.

At 3.30pm the bell for the end of school sounded, and after a moment of calm that made even the birds' stop singing, suddenly hundreds of children burst through the school doors running towards the comparative freedom of home where no bells rung and no-one made them sit up straight. Within this sea of children's flesh Luke was happily caught between a young girl with pig tails and one of the older boys with spots as everyone tried to keep their footing in their flight to freedom.

Luke always thought the school gates looked decidedly worried as this mass of youth hurled itself towards them, laughing and shouting like the barbarians of old. Suddenly a boy about Luke's size began to lose his footing in front of him. Luke quickly grabbed hold of him and pulled him upright all the time pushing him forwards as well. The child didn't have time to look back but shouted "Thanks!" as they were both thrust out of the school portals into the street. Luke saw the child he'd saved run away down the street towards a large red car. A woman got out and ushered the child into the back seat, but before getting in the child turned and waved to him. Luke waved back, but felt a bit silly for doing so as he hadn't the faintest idea who he was waving at. Still, he smiled and the boy got into his mother's car

and was driven away. Luke watched and poignantly wished his mother had a car. His mother had tried to pass her driving test several times but had failed each time. Obviously she was as bad at driving as he was at English, although walking home, supposedly, kept Luke fit and healthy. At least that's what his mother said. He liked being fit and healthy but still wished his mother had a car to drive him home.

He was approaching the Old Jepson House again. He could always tell when he began to get close as there was always a chill in the air and no matter how many jumpers you wore, that chill would always find a way to make you cold even on the warmest of days. As always the large attic room at the top of the house was the first to come into view over the hedge. Everything about the house was black, even the roof, even the curtains. Luke began walking on tiptoe, as though not to disturb the house. Something about it held your attention, almost demanded your attention, or fear, as you walked by. No one wanted to look at the Old Jepson House, but everybody did, even the adults. There were no flowers in the garden, unless you thought weeds counted as flowers and there were plenty of them. They grew like they knew this were their home and the only way through was the harsh looking path that cut its way through the weeds and up to the front door. Luke found that even when he was with friends their conversation stopped as they passed by here.

Suddenly out of the corner of his eye he saw something move. He froze. After a second or so he slowly put his right foot back on the floor and turned his head a little. There it was again! A slight movement of the curtains in the large attic room. Luke didn't dare turn his head any further towards the house. His hands were beginning to sweat. His throat had suddenly become very dry. No one could be living there surely? No one in their right mind would ever live in a house like that. Not if they were in their right mind. Luke could see the edge of the curtain had moved again and it seemed there was a possibility that he was being watched. Some mad person was watching him, he was sure of it. Of all the children to be looking at, why couldn't it be someone else? Why did it have to be him? He stiffened. He realized he probably looked pretty suspicious, or at the very least silly just standing there doing nothing. Suddenly the wind blew from behind and it felt as if there was an icy hand on his shoulder. Luke was so scared he couldn't even shiver. Without thinking he began to turn his head towards the house. If someone was looking at him, he was going to look back at them, even if it did feel like the stupidest thing he'd ever done in his short life. As his head turned the curtain suddenly flicked back into place and remained shut. His feet felt rooted to the spot, and as a bead of sweat traveled down his brow, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Suddenly the house itself didn't seem so frightening, just the thought of who or what may be inside. Luke backed away but before turning and running he just had time to realize, that even though he had been more frightened than ever before, he suddenly felt a burning sensation inside to know all the secrets the Old Jepson House had been hiding from view.

CHAPTER TWO

After tea that day Luke rushed out into the street to play football as he often did.

"Don't kick the ball near the cars!" his mother screamed after him.

"I wont" he shouted back as he began to kick the ball off the gennal wall. He usually dashed out as soon as any meal finished so as not to be coerced into helping with the washing up. His mother could always find him something to do, even if she rarely seemed to be doing anything herself and going out to play seemed to be the most successful way out of it. Today he decided to play alone instead of with his friends. He'd no doubt that they'd be in the park, playing football, as usual, but today he wanted some time to think. What was he to do about the Old Jepson House? He knew he certainly wasn't going to go up to the front door and ring the bell, but how else was he supposed to find out who was inside? Perhaps his mother might find out for him, but then he wanted this to be his own adventure. Adults would

just spoil it.

Luke dribbled the ball around to the gable end of the row of houses and began kicking it off the wall again and again. He always enjoyed the feeling of his foot striking the ball and seeing it soar into the air. A good cross or a good shot seemed to give him far more satisfaction than a word understood or written down. His mother had said that words were far more important, and he supposed that they were for people that could understand them, but everyone understood when a football went into the back of the net. Crowds cheered. Heroes were born.

He sent the ball crashing back against the brickwork of the house, the resulting slap echoing out into the street. Suddenly from out of the front door came his next-door neighbour, Mrs. Mawkin. She was carrying a tea towel as she often did. In fact he didn't think he'd ever seen her without a tea towel in those large red hands of hers. Constant washing had given them the impression of being badly burnt, all glowing and chapped. She always had a pinched expression on her face, and he wondered how Mr. Mawkin managed to put up with it day after day.

Not that Luke often saw Mr. Mawkin, who seemed to spend all his days and nights in the pub. Watching Mrs. Mawkin coming towards him like a crab walking forwards, Luke could easily understand why.

"What do you think you're doing?", she said, furiously

drying the cup she had in her hands. "Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, that's all I can hear in there." Mrs. Mawkin's voice sounded like a machine gun rattling bullets into the air. The side of Luke's eye began to twitch every time he heard it.

"Now go and play with that football somewhere else you little terror!" Luke felt his eye beginning to twitch. "And stop winking at me!" she screamed. "Why are you always winking at me?"

He put his hand over the side of his eye. "Sorry Mrs. Mawkin." He smiled as sweetly as he could, picked up the ball and began walking back to his house.

"And don't let it happen again," she said and shook her fist at him. Luke smiled to himself, as he nodded his agreement. Sometimes it was fun to upset old people, who always seemed to take things far too seriously. His mother said that it was naughty and that Luke sometimes got the devil in him, which he supposed he did. But then if the oldies could see the joke and not get all upset then he probably wouldn't do it. It was only fun if they shook their fists and stamped their feet. Mrs. Mawkin always seemed to be upset, causing Luke to conclude that having your hands constantly in water obviously sent you a little potty. Reason enough not to wash his hands as often as his mother would have liked him to.

That night, as would often happen, Luke found himself

sitting in the armchair slowly watching the clock go around. Nine o'clock was his official bedtime, but he always hated going to bed before everyone else. 8.47 pm. He looked over to where his mother was sitting on the couch with Kevin. Big, hairy monster Kevin. Still there and spread out all over the place.

"Do you want a drink of something?" Luke's mother was playing with the mass of hair on Kevin's chin, twisting it round and round in her fingers. She was smiling and giggling like a girl in a playground. Luke's heart sank as he realized that perhaps girls didn't grow out of that behaviour after all.

"Beer." said Kevin, in that special voice he had that sounded slower and less complex than everyone else's. Luke's mother jumped up and bounced into the kitchen to get it as Luke sat there thinking, "What did your last slave die of?" Suddenly he became aware that Kevin seemed to be smiling at him. It was difficult to tell through all that hair, but Kevin's cheeks had definitely moved in such a way as to suggest that a smile had taken place. He squirmed in his chair a little as Kevin continued to stare.

"Alright?" Kevin said. Luke paused for a second, a little taken aback. "Yes." he said, wondering how long he could take Kevin's scintillating conversation.

"Well alright then", Kevin said and went back into his

beard. Luke watched him. Obviously that was going to be the end of their bonding for this evening as his mother walked back into the room holding a can of beer.

"Bed!" she said to Luke, "and no arguments!" Luke looked over to the wall clock as it ticked around to ten to nine. He sighed. There was no point in arguing anyway. He never got to stay up late when mum had a boyfriend around. If she was on her own and lonely then she often came and cuddled up to him, sometimes letting him stay up as late as ten or ten-thirty. He liked that. But as soon as a new boyfriend came into town, he got sidelined. As though he'd been put on the substitute's bench by his own mother. Luke stood up. His mother kissed him, put her arms around him, and as she did so he felt the cold can of lager against his back. It felt wet with condensation and sent a shiver down his spine. Luke didn't say anything. There didn't seem anything to say. He just felt cold.

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Luke lay dreaming that night as he often did, although lately his dreams had become far more troubled than normal. His bedclothes were often drenched with sweat the morning after, leaving his mother with even more washing to complain about. At least he wasn't a bed wetter she'd said, which was little compensation for the torment his nights were regularly bringing.

This night Luke's dream seemed to be in an old warehouse of sorts. A spotlight was on him as he sat on the floor in his pajamas, the cold of the concrete permeating the material. Surrounding the spotlight was total darkness. A darkness unlike any he had ever seen before, and yet here he was underneath this bright light, totally exposed and vulnerable, wondering what terror the dark may be hiding. He stood up. He felt a need to run into the dark, but an overwhelming fear of leaving the light. If he stayed he could be seen, caught, destroyed, anything. But if he left, who knows what he'd bump into out in the dark? He knew he'd certainly get lost. Seconds seemed to be dredging their way through the inky blackness, losing themselves in it, as though time needed a flashlight. Luke felt caught. Half of him pushing one way, half pulling the other. He didn't know what to do. Suddenly out of the dark rushed a screaming thing, large, black and hairy, a death with teeth.

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Luke woke and sat up, his lungs full of air ready to scream. His mouth was open and for several seconds he held onto the bed, his knuckles straining to retain any colour, his heart beating, beating as though too large for his body. His eyes had not the courage to move but stared ahead, without seeing. He was awake. Slowly his brain reminded him that here he was, at home, in his bed, safe, or at the very

least safe-ish. His mother downstairs with Kevin giggling together. He was alive. Luke was not going to be alive for very much longer, however, unless he remembered to breathe. The air in his lungs came rushing out like an express train leaving Luke needing to quickly breathe in again and after a few seconds his heart and breathing rate slowly returned to normal as he sat there in his bed, his pajamas dripping with sweat.

After a few more seconds staring into the darkness that surrounded him, he lay back down in his bed. His mother had forgotten to leave the hall light on again, but he figured that with Kevin here they were probably safe. Anybody looking like Kevin was bound to scare off other monsters anyway. He smiled to himself and wondered if that's why his mother had decided to go out with him. Like a big, mean, hairy dog! Perhaps boyfriends had their uses after all.

Luke looked up to the ceiling. The moonlight was illuminating a crack that seemed to run from one side of the room to the other. He wondered why every ceiling he'd ever seen seemed to have had a crack in it. He was sure there were some ceilings that didn't have cracks in them, and he realized that he didn't really take that much notice of ceilings, but the ones he did bother to look at always had a crack in them somewhere. He was sure they weren't supposed to, although he knew he was no expert on the matter.

Luke quickly realized that he didn't really want to think about ceilings, but that it was a very convenient way of not thinking about his dream. Of that awful feeling of being trapped in that spotlight. Of not knowing what to do or where, if anywhere, to go. Of being alone! He shivered as he remembered. He turned over onto his side and faced the window of his room. On the windowsill there sat a dead spider. Luke looked at it. Its forlorn little body slowly becoming brittle and translucent. A little life that had come to an end. Had it been happy, he wondered? Did it have a family that loved it? Luke knew that things died. All things died, but unlike the rest of us spiders didn't seem to really mind where they did it, as if they had no shame in being dead. Here, for instance was a spider obviously as bold as brass about the whole thing, dead for everyone to see and didn't mind a bit. Dust was forming on its tiny legs and body confirming Luke's suspicion that his mother didn't dust quite as often as she said she did. He pulled the covers over himself again. He didn't really want to think about spiders either but it was almost as if he were scared to go back to sleep. He realized this was silly. Even if he dreamed there was no reason to think he'd have the same dream again.

A tiny pocket of fear began teasing the hairs at the back of his neck. All Luke remembered was how it had made him

feel, this beast from the black. This screaming machine of flesh and sharp teeth, quicker than lightning and far more deadly. This shredder of children that seemed to have Luke's name at the top of his list. He shivered as he remembered how it had made him feel, and sincerely hoped he would never dream or see anything like it again. Luke looked over the covers into the dark outside his open door and wondered if he was ever going to be able to sleep again.

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The next morning he set off to school particularly early. His mother had a distinctly confused look on her face as he dashed out some twenty minutes before usual, giving Luke the impression that for the first time he was striking out in areas that adults simply had no control over. He was becoming his own man, capable of making decisions on his own and he had to say that excited him! Of course if his mother knew what he was about to do then she would have probably died from worrying about him, but as all those movies had taught him, 'a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do'.

He had been especially unnerved by the nightmare of the night previously, but felt that somehow it had something to do with the Old Jepson House. He'd never had a nightmare anything like it before. He'd been feeling decidedly different since walking past that house yesterday, and somehow he knew that the two events were connected. Since

school had always seemed like a secondary consideration to him, and no one seemed to care enough to make a difference there, he didn't feel so bad about the prospect of missing one day in 'Hell'. Today he was going to explore. Today he was going to go further than even Bobby Sampson would have dared to go. Into the house itself if he could. He knew he'd find some way in. He had too. This was his adventure after all.

Luke quickly made his way along his normal route to school. There were several other children on their way too, and this was something that he hadn't been expecting. The streets were virtually deserted when he usually set off, but now here he was surrounded by parents leading their children into school on time. 'On time' seemed like an alien concept to Luke. Sometimes he even felt glad to be dyslexic. Most people didn't expect too much of him, but here were all these other children, with all the weight of expectation on their shoulders. Their bright futures surely couldn't look so bright if they were being forced into it.

Luke carried on walking, forging his way towards his bleak destination, his destiny, his dream. He knew that no matter what the other kids were capable of, not one of them would have ever attempted what he was about to. He smiled. Looking over to a group of other kids walking to school he noticed that they hadn't a smile between them. They all had

their heads down in resigned misery, like they had invisible nooses around all their young 'intelligent' heads.

Luke began to feel the first real wave of excitement washing over him, whetting his consciousness with what was to come. His feet began to step faster and faster, even though his heart was racing with fear as well. It didn't seem to matter. He just wanted to turn the corner and face that house again. That grey, cold monument to every child's fear. His feet were moving faster and faster as though he were some demented long distance walker, some reject from the Olympics.

Suddenly the old attic room at the top of the house came into view again and his footsteps slowed to a crawl. Here it was at last. Many of the tiles were cracked and falling and the roof had that decrepit look about it, like so many old people had. The entire house looked as if it was the oldest face he had ever seen, with cracks and wrinkles everywhere, the loose tiles like thinning hair, and the windows, cold blank eyes that showed no sign of humanity. Luke stopped in front of the gates and stared for a moment at this brick and mortar adversary.

"No-one likes that old place, do they?" said a voice.

Luke swirled around to face whoever had just spoken. A red car had pulled up at the roadside and the woman inside was smiling at him. For some reason he thought he recognized

her, but didn't really know where from. Suddenly Luke turned his attention to the back seat, where a young boy was smiling and waving at him.

"We just wanted to thank you for yesterday," the woman said.

"Joshua told me how you saved him from being trampled."

Luke suddenly realized why the young boy in the back seat was waving so furiously. Luke had been his saviour, the day before in the mad dash away from school.

"Well, you're welcome!" he said smiling back at the woman, but really wishing that she would go away.

"Are you interested in the Old Jepson House?" the woman said, pointing up to it.

"Why? Do you know anything about it?" Luke said drawing closer to the car.

"Only that it's been deserted for years. It was like that when I was your age. None of the kids liked it." The woman leaned across and opened the passenger door. "Get in", she said, "I'll run you to school."

Luke stiffened. That was the last thing he wanted.

"Well there must be someone living there now," he said. "I saw the curtains moving yesterday."

The woman smiled. "Probably just the wind, or squatters. Get in!"

He hesitated. If he got into the car his adventure would be over before it had even begun.

"I'm sorry, but my Mother always told me to never get into a stranger's car." Luke smiled politely. "I'll be alright walking to school, honestly." He smiled even wider so that his jaw began to ache as the woman shrugged brightly.

"Well your Mother gave you very good advice. You never should get into a stranger's car. Joshua did you hear that?" The woman turned to face the back seat with a quizzical look on her face. Joshua gave a resigned sigh. "Yes Mother, I know." Joshua had dark hair and a refined accent and Luke realized for the first time how posh they both seemed. The woman turned back to face him.

"Well, once again Joshua and I want to thank you for yesterday. My name's Sarah, by the way. We've just moved back to the area, so I'm sure we'll see you again." She closed the door, waved and with that was gone. Luke faced the road for a few seconds as though in a trance. Perhaps he should have gone with them. Perhaps he should go to school. After all he had faced that particular 'Hell' hundreds of times before but he'd never faced the one that loomed behind him. For the second time in the space of twelve hours he didn't know what to do. Should he turn and face his fears or just carry on walking? After all he had his school books with him. He could go to school. He could forget all about his adventure in the Old Jepson House, which more and more seemed like a very silly idea indeed. Luke shivered. What

should he do? His dream had made him feel the same way. Frightened of one way. Frightened of the other. If he didn't turn and face that house, could he really call himself a man, and yet if he did face that house he wasn't exactly sure that he'd remain alive. Who knew what, or who, lay in wait for him. After all there was surely no point being a 'man' if he only had this morning to remain alive. He'd far prefer to be the boy that he was and stay breathing. Luke remained rooted to the spot. If Gemima Peachblossom were here right now what would she say? Would she think him a hero or a coward?

He looked up into the clear blue sky. It was a lovely day! Although he still felt cold. A large black bird flew onto the branch of a nearby tree. It squawked. Luke, still as a corpse, eyed it intently. The bird squawked again, this time looking in his direction.

"Well what do you think I should do?" he said, as though expecting an answer. The bird squawked again and then launched itself out of the tree, its wings spreading out like black knives diving towards him. He ducked down as the bird swooped over him, its flight path heading directly for the Old Jepson House. It seemed to flap its wings once, which carried it up, up, until it came to land on the attic window. Luke turned around to see it perched there, proudly. It looked down and squawked again, as though daring him to

come any closer. Luke raised himself back up to his full height and steeled himself for what was to come.

"No bird is going to be braver than me," he thought. (He understood that his logic may have been slightly chaotic, reacting to a bird like that, but whatever gave him the courage to attempt what lay ahead was welcomed). He took two steps forward to face the black iron gate.

There was a huge old padlock, brown with rust that held together thick black chains around the gate. They looked like they hadn't been opened for decades and he quickly dismissed the idea of trying to get them open. He realized the only other way in would be to try and find a gap in the hedge or climb the gates and hope he didn't get stuck or lose his courage half way up. Having never seen a gap anywhere in the green and brown morass of thorns that stood for a hedge around the Old Jepson House Luke sighed and contemplated the climb ahead. The gates were well over ten feet high and just as he had decided to start, his courage forcing him on, his hands reaching for their first good hold on the iron bars, he heard a desperate cry off to his left. "LUKE!!!" Luke swirled to his left to see his Mother hurrying along the pavement, holding a package aloft in her right hand. She was signalling like a traffic policeman gone mad as Luke silently cursed under his breath. What did she want? Huffing and puffing up to him like an old steam engine

running out of coal.

"You forgot your packed lunch," his mother said as she came to a standstill in front of him, her hand gripping her side.

"Oh." He said. She passed him the brown paper bag containing the four egg and cress sandwiches, which she always seemed to make him and smiled.

"Go on then. Off to school with you, and have a good day, Mr.

Forgetful."

His mother stroked his hair, bent down and kissed him on the cheek. She smiled again and watched him as Luke had to turn and with a resigned air made his way off down the road towards school. He looked back towards the Old Jepson House. It seemed to be mocking his bad luck as once again his adventure would have to wait. His Mother was still standing there. She waved. He waved back, then slowly turned, his head bowed and walked towards school, once more.

CHAPTER THREE

Luke turned into the school gates that morning, not noticing any of the other children around him. He had resigned himself to another day spent trying to understand things that seemed almost incomprehensible, things that seemed literally child's play to the children around him. He sighed. He knew that being dyslexic would never go away. It would be with him forever, like the colour of his eyes or the shape of his nose. It defined who he was, but it meant that being who he was was never that much fun. Sometimes he could forget, when he was out playing, or even sleeping, but always something would remind him, another child perhaps or just something as simple as trying to read the school menu. That was why he always brought a packed lunch, so he wouldn't have to go through the humiliation of being in the

school canteen, desperately trying to figure out what was on offer. Some days he prayed to wake up without that ever present stigma hanging above his head, but it was always there and he knew it would always be there. Of course in some ways he knew he was lucky. Some children were born deaf or blind or couldn't even play football and he knew it must be terrible for them. Some children, on the other hand seemed to have everything and just took all that they'd been given for granted. Fair didn't seem to come into it, his mother said. That was just how it was, and how you chose to deal with the cards dealt you, defined you just as much as the cards themselves. Luke knew his mother would have wished for a different set of cards for him, just as much as he wished for them himself. Being a single mother with a dyslexic child couldn't really be much fun for her either. Although she would often stroke his hair, after she'd had a drink or two, and say he was her special child and she loved him more than anything in the world. He liked that, even though he realized being special wasn't quite the same as being normal.

"Hey look!" Luke looked up to see Bobby Sampson pointing at him from the other side of the playground. He was surrounded by his cohorts as usual. Smaller bullies who prospered under Bobby's direction.

"The retard's turned up on time for once!"

Bobby and the rest burst out laughing as Luke carried on walking solemnly across the yard. He didn't really have the energy to react today. Already things hadn't gone according to plan.

"Hey retard!" Bobby's voice boomed out so that every child in the playground suddenly seemed to be looking at Luke. He noticed a group of girls giggling underneath the large blossom tree planted in the middle of the grounds.

"Retard!" boomed Bobby again. "Spell stupid for us." Luke suddenly stopped and smiled. Bobby had once said this before and in the privacy of his own room Luke had prepared an answer for him.

"What?" Luke shouted. "Spell what?" Bobby giggled, his face turning red. He inhaled a lungful of air and bellowed, "STU..PID!!" Luke tried to remain calm.

"B.." he shouted back.

Bobby and indeed most of the playground fell about in fits of giggles as Luke paused before carrying on.

"O..B..B..Y...S..A..M..P..S..O..N"

Slowly the playground fell quiet as it became obvious what Luke was spelling out. Bobby Sampson, who wasn't quite as bright as he made out, was a few seconds behind most of the others. Suddenly the girls underneath the blossom tree began giggling and pointing at Bobby whose face had suddenly fallen like a lemming. He darkened thunderously as the girls

continued to giggle and pointed towards Luke who had coolly carried on walking across the yard smiling as he went. "I'll get you for that, retard," screamed Bobby. For a second Luke wondered if Bobby might run over and start a fight, until luckily the bell rang out around the playground, calling everyone inside. Luke reached the school doors before anyone else, and as he opened them he had the chance to turn back and look at Bobby Sampson push his way out of his circle of friends furiously, his face looking like it might explode and for the first time ever, Luke walked into school with a smile on his face.

#

He seemed to have a smile on his face for the rest of that morning. Every now and again he would think about what had happened earlier and it lifted his spirits as they had never been lifted in school before. A little work, preparation and the right opportunity and he'd proved to the school that perhaps he wasn't so stupid after all. If only Gemima Peachblossom had been there to witness it, all would have been perfect, but then, he knew, you can't have everything. Luke realized that Bobby Sampson would probably beat him up at some point, but for some strange reason that didn't seem to scare him. Bobby was big and strong and some several inches taller than Luke, but suddenly none of that seemed to matter. Bobby Sampson didn't seem so big anymore,

or scary and besides, Luke thought, "bruises heal".

When the bell went for morning break Luke sauntered out of the classroom as though he had not a care in the world. Usually he would be first out of the door, dashing into the freedom of the playground, but today there seemed to be no rush. As he made it outside all the other children seemed to be out there before him, rushing around, kicking balls or skipping rope. As he stood there watching them a calm began to permeate the air. Child after child stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. Perhaps the news of that morning had spread around the school? Perhaps this was some silent tribute to their hero, Luke, the David to Bobby's Goliath. The one who through the power of speech alone had felled their champion. He smiled to himself enjoying the attention. Perhaps now the group had found the respect for him that he always thought he deserved. And this made Luke feel very proud.

Suddenly Bobby Sampson appeared from behind the doorway where he'd obviously been lying in wait. There he stood in front of Luke, large, looming and seemingly very very very very very very very very very angry. Luke realized that the reason the crowd in the playground had turned to look, was not to pay their respects to him but rather to see him get the beating of a lifetime. Luke assumed the visage of a rabbit seeing car headlights speeding towards it.

(Understandably he was a little tense). The idea of Bobby not being quite so scary immediately left Luke now that he was facing him.

"I suppose you think you're funny, don't you?" said Bobby prodding Luke in the chest. "Well let me tell you retard you wont think you're so funny when I smash you to a pulp. You won't be so funny then, will you?" Bobby's prodding was worse than water torture, and it was definitely beginning to annoy Luke who drew himself up to his full height and shouted out as loudly as he could,

"PEOPLE WHO USE THEIR FISTS CAN'T USE THEIR BRAINS!!" He proudly looked at Bobby whose eyes seemed to be on fire with rage. Luke tried desperately not to look afraid, in fact he concentrated very hard on not looking afraid, and then....Bobby punched him on the nose.....hard! Luke went onto the floor holding his nose and screaming in pain. He'd never felt any pain like it. He felt sure that his nose must be broken or at the very least severely bent. Bobby stood over him like a heavyweight champion stands over a defeated opponent, smiling at the victory.

"And that's what you get for being clever, retard!" Bobby laughed. He walked away from Luke who had curled up into a ball on the floor. Luke was pretty sure that a punch in the nose was not what you got for being clever. A nice house and a well paid job were what you got for being clever, but he

thought it best not to argue again right now. Besides, he had a nosebleed to take care of.

Slowly, after several seconds and quite a few glances around to make sure Bobby had gone, he began to raise himself up off the ground. He wiped his nose on his handkerchief and looked around. Under the tree Gemima Peachblossom stood looking at him. Luke looked to the ground as he realized she had a look of pity on her face. Probably everyone had a look of pity on their face for him at the moment.

"If only she'd seen me earlier" he thought not really caring what anyone else thought of him. He looked up towards her again, the sun was shining through her hair as though it shone just for her. She was so pretty, so poised and here he was, blood streaming from his nose and dirt from the ground all over him. He wiped his nose again and did his best to smile and shrug at her, as though what had just happened didn't matter. Of course it did. Luke had said what he meant, people that use their fists can't use their brains, and Bobby had proved him right using a shockingly painful right hook. Being right didn't mean that Luke was in any less pain, and that mattered a great deal.

And then, slowly, he also began to realize that he didn't have a clue what to do next. Should he run back inside or stay out here and try and find one of his friends.

Friends that had conveniently been elsewhere when he was being hit in the face. Luke shuffled from one foot to the other feeling distinctly awkward. There were never any guidelines as to what you should do after being hit, or losing a fight. Of course the winner got to go off and act like a hero, but what did the other poor soul do? Everyone was still staring. Staring as though they didn't know what to do either.

"HEY!!" Luke looked over to where the voice was coming from. A small boy appeared out of the crowd as though surrounded by statues. At first Luke didn't recognize him. He was carrying a football that looked new, very new, but before Luke had the time to get envious he realized the boy was the same one from that morning in the red car, Joshua!

"What?" said Luke, wiping his nose again. He noticed the blood had just about stopped running.

"Do you play football?" said Joshua holding the ball aloft. Luke looked shocked at what seemed like a very stupid question indeed.

"Of course, I do!" he replied. "And better than you I'll bet."

Joshua simply smiled at Luke's response.

"What's your name?" Luke looked at him for a second or two and then at the crowd who now had their eyes on Joshua as well. Luke pushed out his hand.

"Luke." Joshua's smile got even wider as he took Luke's hand and shook it. Soon Luke was smiling as well. First smiling and then laughing. They were both laughing as they felt the eyes of the crowd all over them. They didn't really know why they were laughing, but it certainly seemed like a good idea at the time. Suddenly Joshua turned and kicked the ball high in the air shouting, "COME ON THEN!!" They both began to run after it as it swirled round and round higher and higher, then lower and lower before bouncing off the tarmac below. As soon as it did, the resulting slap echoed around the yard giving the signal that everything was back to normal. All the other children began their dashing around, their shouting and their skipping, as though what had just happened hadn't happened at all.

As Luke ran off he felt a great relief that it was all over. He wasn't quite sure what had happened but he was definitely glad not to be the centre of attention any more. Joshua reached the ball first and kicked it over to the other side of the playground where several boys were waiting to join them. Before running after it Luke suddenly stopped and looked back. He didn't know why. Instinct perhaps or just chance, but as he did so he saw Gemima still standing motionless underneath the tree. Everyone else had gone back to what they were doing, but not her. She still had her eyes fixed firmly on him, and for some reason that made his heart

beat just a little bit faster.

"Come on," shouted Joshua from behind him. And so with one last glance in her direction, Luke turned and ran off.

#

That night Luke sat at the dinner table ravenous as ever. "What are we having for tea Mum??" he cried holding knife and fork in hand ready and waiting. "Pizza!" his mother shouted from the kitchen. "Go and wash your hands." Luke sighed and wondered why his mother seemed to have this paranoid fixation with the washing of his hands? Whatever they seemed to be doing, be it eating, sleeping or playing she always wanted Luke to wash his hands before and after. He could understand that if he'd been playing in mud all day long, but most of the time his hands just didn't look dirty. He'd wear a pair of socks for a day and she'd wash those too, even though he knew he could comfortably wear them for a week without them smelling too badly. He trailed upstairs to the bathroom and began running the water until it got warm enough to wash in. Turning the soap over and over in his hands he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He wondered if Bobby had done any permanent damage to his nose, but apart from a slight redness afterwards, which had quickly disappeared, there didn't seem to be any sign that he'd been punched at all.

He smiled remembering the rest of the day. Joshua had

saved him from an embarrassing situation and turned out to be quite a good footballer as well, certainly better than he'd expected a posh kid to be. Joshua had told him all about his mother who had moved back to her home town after his father had left them. Joshua didn't have a father either then, so that meant they had another thing in common. Luke rinsed off his hands and moved downstairs. His mother had just placed the large pizza in the middle of the table. It looked far too big for just the two of them to manage, but then perhaps his mother felt ravenous too. Sometimes she would eat and eat and eat, and then sometimes it seemed like she wouldn't touch food for days. She would just touch herself in the mirror, holding onto her stomach with her hands and moaning regretfully. Luke had once made the mistake of saying she looked fat around the middle and she'd angrily said,

"That's because I have a womb! Idiot!" Luke wasn't particularly sure what a womb was at the time, but just assumed that fat women had them and thin ones didn't. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. His mother shouted, "I'll get it!" and then began to furiously brush her hair in the mirror. She peered into the mirror closely and pressed her lips together. She was wearing lipstick, which Luke realized meant a man was coming to the house. He sighed. Kevin! Again! The knock on the door came again, this time a

little more insistent.

"COMING!" his mother shouted breezily as she looked up her nose in the mirror. Luke often wondered what she was looking for up there, but decided it was best not to ask. His mother quickly rubbed both nostrils with her thumb and forefinger and then dashed to the door and suddenly stopped in front of it. She took a deep breath, exhaled and slowly turned the handle and peered outside.

"HI!" she said smiling, as Kevin's beard appeared through the doorway.

"Hi...I brought you these." Luke's mother flung open the door, nearly hitting Luke in the face as a result, and spread her arms wide. Kevin was standing there holding onto a large bunch of white and yellow flowers.

"Oh they're lovely", she screeched and gathered them into her arms. Luke wondered how long this ritual was going to take as he was sure the pizza would be going cold.

"Thank you!" she said and kissed Kevin on the cheek. Luke grimaced at the thought of kissing all that hair. Surely it would make her stomach turn.

"Come and sit down!" she said ushering Kevin into the room. He lumbered in past Luke, his large frame looking slightly too big for the clothes he was wearing.

Quickly she fussed them both into chairs, poured two glasses of white wine, an orange juice for Luke and sat down

herself, grinning happily.

"Dig in!" she said to Kevin, who's eyes seemed to light up at the sight of food. Luke watched him as he quickly dived into the pizza and pulled off the biggest piece, as though he deserved it for showing up or something. Luke knew if he'd done that his mother would have slapped his hand and told him not to be so selfish. Luke knew that Kevin would not be getting his hand slapped this evening though.

The rest of the meal passed in comparative silence, but for the slurping and chewing and sucking of fingers that went along with the pizza experience. Kevin and Luke's mother didn't exchange a word, but would every now and again just turn and smile to each other and then dive back into the action of devouring their food. Sometimes they would tilt back their heads and feed a long string of cheese into each other's mouth, reminding Luke of the baby gannets he'd once seen on a documentary. Slurping, gurgling and gulping and seemingly unable to fend for themselves. He wondered if that's what being in a relationship meant, relying on others to do what you were perfectly capable of doing yourself? Losing one's independence, individuality. A shiver went down Luke's spine. Yuk!

#

Bedtime, once again came around pretty quickly. As Luke settled down underneath the covers he could still hear his

mother laughing and giggling downstairs. She sounded like a silly schoolgirl with a crush, but at least she was happy. She certainly seemed to smile more these days, which Luke concluded wasn't a bad thing. However he knew this kind of thing usually ended in tears for his mother. Several times men had come and gone, leaving his Mother crying, drinking wine and eating chocolates on the sofa. He usually felt pretty useless at these times. He would hug her and kiss her, but nothing seemed to help. Months would sometimes pass with her in a perpetually bad mood, only for it to be lifted by the next man that came along. Luke didn't really understand why the men left. His mother was always nice to them, cooking their meals, washing their clothes, laughing at their jokes and stroking their hair, but still, one morning, they would have up and left, leaving him to try and pick up the pieces. He thought at one point that it might be him that was driving them away, but he could remember well enough to know that he'd never been particularly naughty when they were around. He'd always been careful not to shout too loud or ask for too much, so he knew it couldn't be his fault, could it? He didn't really believe it was his mother's fault either or at least that was what she always said.

"It's not my fault your father left us, you know!!", she would say. Luke thought that probably applied to her

boyfriends as well. "I just want to find a nice man and settle down."

At this point tears would begin to well up in the corner of her eyes and she would crumple back down into a heap again. Kevin just seemed like a big hairy monster to Luke, but if his mother was happy again, then he was glad, for the moment. Luke turned onto his side and was quickly asleep.

#

Black. Blacker than pitch. Blacker than his socks after football practice. Luke could feel that he was dreaming again, but for the first time in one of his dreams he couldn't see anything. He knew he was there because he could feel cold swirling around his body, he could touch his own face, feeling the skin on his fingertips, feeling his fingertips on his face and yet it seemed for the moment that he was totally blind.

He stood for a moment or two hoping that his eyes would adjust to the dark. He put his hand up directly in front of his eyes, and by straining desperately he could just see the outline of it. Where he was he didn't know, but he could feel the cold. It felt as if he were in an icebox with the temperature well below freezing. He put his arms around himself and pulled what felt like his pajamas closer to his chest. He took a couple of tentative steps, sliding his feet along a solid concrete floor. Perhaps he was in the Witch's

basement again. Luke put his hands out in front of him. He knew that if he could find a wall, then no doubt he'd be able to find a door and get out of this place. The cold was beginning to make his teeth chatter like maracas as he kept on sliding first one foot forward and then the next. As he couldn't see anything in front of him, he didn't dare pick his feet up as his Mother would have told him to. He may step on nails, spikes, snakes, scorpions anything. Shuffling was all he dared do until he could see again.

Suddenly he stopped. It felt as if something was behind him. As if he was being stalked in the dark. Of course he couldn't be sure, but gut instinct told him he wasn't here for a tea party. He slowly turned around and peered into the darkness. Nothing. And yet wherever he was, he couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't alone. His stomach was beginning to ache, as though his intestines had decided to twist themselves into a new shape. The hairs on the back of his neck had formed themselves into an army platoon, standing stiff and he hardly dared breathe he was that scared.

So this was what it was like out here in the dark, he thought. As if you were getting ready to die.

He turned back and thrust out his arms once more, but before taking his first step, he heard something like a whisper in his left ear. He quickly turned his head towards it. A

second or two passed and there it was again, more of a whimper this time. Luke began to slide his feet in that direction. For a second it sounded like a puppy in pain, left down here to freeze to death. He quickened the sliding of his feet as the whimpering got louder and louder.

Suddenly it became apparent that the sounds weren't coming from a puppy, but from a child. A child was crying somewhere in the dark. The crying of someone that had been crying for a very long time, voice rasping, tear ducts all but dry. But where shedding tears usually alleviated some of the torment, it was obvious that no amount of tears could help aid this child's suffering and Luke felt like crying, just from hearing the sound itself.

"Where are you?" He shouted into the blackness. For a moment there was silence. Then the whimpering began again.

"I said where are you? Luke's voice was louder this time. The whimpering quickly turned into sobbing and he once again began to shuffle towards the noise.

Suddenly, like a razor slicing skin, a beam of white light appeared from the ceiling. Luke shaded his eyes from it, turning his head away. It felt as if needles were being thrust into his eyes, the contrast was that great. Whatever or whoever had been whimpering screamed out in pain. It seemed to last forever as he turned back and tried desperately to look into the light.

"Help me! Oh God help me!" the voice cried as Luke rubbed his eyes furiously. He looked down and was eventually able to make out his pajamas. Some distant recess of his brain told him that they weren't the same pair that he went to bed with, but the thought quickly vanished as the young boy's moans began again. Luke shielded his eyes and slowly looked up towards where the light was shining. For a second or two he found it difficult to make out anything and then slowly, as though his eyes had remembered to see, everything came into sharp focus. There, in the light, the cone of brightness from above, the same as Luke himself had been caught in the night before, was Bobby Sampson. He was strapped in to what seemed like a dentists chair with a small table beside him. On the table was what looked like a large old fisherman's hook, the kind people use instead of a hand. Bobby seemed frantic, sweat pouring off him, valiantly struggling against the straps that were holding him down. His eyes almost seemed to be popping out of his head in fear, his face bulging out the colour of a beetroot. "Save me retard!!" he screamed. "Get me out of here." Luke was frozen with his own fear. "Help me! Don't you see? She's going to take my eyes!"

He pulled himself up as far as he could and stared out into the blackness. Bobby's eyes widened suddenly as though he could see something in the dark. Luke looked over to where

he was staring and slowly an old gnarled and bony hand pushed itself into the light.

Bobby opened his mouth, and after a seconds hesitation, screamed.

#

Luke found himself being shaken awake as his own screams bounced around his bedroom. His mother stood over him holding onto his shoulders as he stopped screaming and looked up at her.

"It's alright," she said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It's only a nightmare." She smiled sweetly down at him, stroking his hair. He blinked a couple of times reassuring himself that he was back. Back in his own bedroom. Awake. Alive. Protected. He looked up at his mother again.

"It was Bobby Sampson." Luke's voice was almost inaudible.

"It was Bobby Sampson."

Luke's mother looked down at him kindly.

"Well you can forget all about that big bully. He's gone....Now go to sleep!" Slowly she laid him back down into the bed wiping the sweat from his brow and with a smile and a kiss on the cheek, she was gone.