

From The Return of the Jedi

A cross the bridge now, keeping an eye out. He looks through the metal rails to the canal below. They could be anywhere. He takes the gun from his pocket and checks the chamber. Five left. That should be enough unless they've brought reinforcements. He wipes his hand under his arm and smells it – a satisfying tang of sweat. He puts a finger down the back of his shorts and smells it, then wipes the finger on the yellow *Star Wars* T-shirt that his dad bought him. It's a bit tight for him now, and there's a purple stain covering most of R2D2, but it's still his favourite.

The rebels have left him in charge of the boatyard and the stormtroopers could return at any time. If he can just hold them off until the rebels have destroyed the base, his twelve years on this planet will not have been in vain. *Yes sir, there were casualties – no sir, I'm all right. I may have been hit but I'll survive. Thank you sir.* Five caps might not be enough – he wishes he hadn't wasted that shot but the bird taking off like that surprised him. It's not that the stormtroopers are clever but they do have numbers on their side. *They just kept coming sir, like rats.* They've caught him in the past but, so far, he's always managed to escape before Vader arrives in his shuttle, which is just as well. He can resist the stupid interrogations from the stormtroopers' captain, but Vader gets inside your head like Mr Hartley – his form teacher – they both know how to make you feel small, scared and ashamed.

He takes the steps slowly, keeping his back to the railings and pointing the gun around, ready to engage. He might have to use the Force, even though he hasn't been properly trained to do so. At night, lying in bed, he tries to levitate objects around his bedroom, but it's too dark to tell if they've lifted even an inch. It will take time, patience, but above all practice. He can't

control the world around him yet as he can control the world he has created in the top drawer of his bedside cabinet. This drawer is populated with the plastic animal figurines he buys from the newsagent's – pencil tops and toys – and decorated with items he painstakingly draws on paper, colours in and cuts out: a stereo, a TV, a snooker table, a lightsaber. There are tiny homemade posters Blu-Tacked to its walls: one of *Star Wars*, and one of *The Empire Strikes Back*, which he has seen three times since its release in June.

The canal is still and grey. Clumps of weed cling to the tips of rusted metal frames. There is a smell, like the stagnant pond near Aunt Julia's house. At the bottom of the steps he swivels round with the gun at eye level then he turns back, as he was taught to do by Jedi command. It's a pity he doesn't have a lightsaber, but what if he was captured with one? *We're relying on you my boy, but we cannot allow your actions to be traced back to the Alliance.* He is on his own, on this mission. He is always on his own now. It has to be this way, he knows.

If he succeeds he hopes to be allowed to marry Alison Holmes. Once he has revealed his true identity, when they return to school after the holidays, she will find it hard to say no. She'll become a princess after all. That's what girls want. She sits next to him in class and doesn't mind what he brings in for lunch. She has a cheese sandwich and an apple most days, and sometimes a Ski yoghurt – strawberry is her favourite flavour. She talks to him nicely and shows an interest in his sticker collection. Alison has blue-framed glasses with a plaster holding one side together. She lives with her mum, as he lives with his dad. But her dad didn't die, as his mum did; he had simply upped and left them *without a pot to piss in* – he'd heard two girls saying this. It troubled him.

The other children call him 'Fat Matt', or worse, 'Door Matt' – his name being Matthew Dawes. He is overweight, he knows this, but he likes to eat crispy pancakes with chips, and burgers and chips, and egg and chips – like his dad. His dad isn't fat though, because he plays football and works as a builder. His dad has gone to the Dark Side, since he met Dawn, Matt's stepmum. He seems hypnotised by her, in the same way Anakin is hypnotised by Palpatine.

That's strange. He shades his eyes. There's something on the canal path

ahead – by the first shed. Not the usual piece of cardboard flapping aimlessly around. He is going to have to investigate and maybe put in a request for backup. Or go home. Since the boatyard closed, there's not usually anyone here, especially during the week. Sometimes couples come here to kiss at the weekend. Matt hitches up his shorts, wishing he had a droid he could send ahead to check the situation. Is it a trap, laid out by the Empire?

Before he can get close enough to tell, his attention is drawn to the distance. Coming around the corner of the sheds is a gang of boys from the other comprehensive. The ones that chased him across his school field last week, and only stopped when he got to the road and ran straight into the traffic, causing a car to swerve and a couple of drivers to shout angrily at him. Oh, this is bad. The curse of the summer holidays. They see him too – one of them points. He is terrified. They'll catch him here, for sure. They're older and faster. Their torture will be worse than any stormtrooper's punishments, that's for certain. And they'll take their time. He remembers what they did to Dave Harris in the spring term – beat him up, took his shorts and ripped his exercise books apart. As soon as he turns and runs they'll start running too, and then he'll be in trouble – the place where you can't stop what's going to happen from happening. Like at the dentist's when the drill starts its whizzing, whiny noise. Or the place where his mum went to and never came back from.

They're level with the object now. Wait, they've stopped and they're looking at it. Matt steps backwards slowly, experimentally, towards the bridge. They're prodding the object with their feet. It's a man. He's trying to sit up. One of the gang aims a kick at him. Matt hears a shouted protest. He turns and flees back to the bridge, grasping the rail and swinging himself up onto the first step unsteadily. He can hear more protest. Halfway across the bridge he stops, panting, and looks back. The man is on his front shielding himself against sporadic blows and kicks from the five boys. He has his arms around his head.

Gordon jerks back to consciousness. His head is pounding, he feels nauseous. He can barely move. On the ground in front of him: empty bottle, empty bottle, puke. The usual litany. He looks at his wristwatch. It's nearly midday.

He's not meant to be here. He feels around the coat he's been lying in, patting the pockets, looking for fags.

'It's a fucking tramp.'

Oh shit. These kids are big and not like his kids. These kids are blocking the sun. He doesn't know whether to attempt getting up, or just to lie there until they tire of abusing him. He tries to raise himself onto one elbow and retches.

'He's puking. Go on Stevie, do him.'

'Wait I'm ...'

The first blow is to his hip. An experimental prod really, from an unsure teenager.

'Ow.'

There's a tense interlude. He tries to raise himself up further and say something persuasive but neither his head nor his heart is in it, and they can see this. The second blow is harder and better directed – a kick in the stomach – nastier.

'You tramp tosser.'

He can sense they are working each other into a state of genuine anger, like a pack of monkeys chasing a rival to rip it apart, only they don't have much chasing to do. He lies down and covers his head as the third kick lands on his shoulder. He moans to himself in anger and self-pity.

On the bridge Matt watches fascinated and horrified. If his dad was here he'd run them off. His dad wasn't scared of bullies. His dad could take care of himself in a fight. Hadn't his stepmum said so many times, while his dad grinned at him? He could run and get him now. But then he'd have to tell him he'd been in the boatyard and his dad wouldn't be pleased at all. He might ground him for the rest of the holidays. And it would probably be too late – ten minutes to home. Even if his dad was there and agreed to come at once it would be twenty-five minutes before they got back here. Too late. He feels the gun in his hand. What would a Jedi do? *Matt, you must trust the Force.* But he has no experience of using the Force, at least not in daylight hours. *Look, I can't get involved. It's not that I like the Empire; I hate it, but there's nothing I can do about it right now ...* Oh no, no, no. Who is

that man anyway? Maybe he is from the Dark Side. Like Mr Johnson from Cheltenham Gardens, who was taken away by the police for what he did to his nephew. What if Matt saved a Mr Johnson? But his cries didn't sound like Mr Johnson. Mr Johnson was very quiet and very neat.

'Ow, oh fuck OFF!' The irony is he had come here to end it. To roll into the canal and make it all go away. Everything absorbed in a big dark blank, forever and ever, amen. And now it's being done for him. Just like everything else in his life, someone else has had to step in and take over. His wife Lindsay's face – full of contempt – drained of pity. Julie, his eldest daughter, asking him to leave, after she had found him curled up like a baby on his youngest daughter's bed, an empty vodka bottle by his side. A baby with a hangover is not a pretty sight. Oh, fuck, in the HEAD this time. A white flash and sharp pain; he covers his skull with his arms.

'Stop!'

RIBS. HEAD. BACK.

'Leave him alone.'

They leave Gordon alone. They're still standing around him but they're looking at Matt now. He points the gun, a sweaty finger on the trigger. They don't know it's not a real gun, do they? They don't know him at all, except as the fat kid.

'It's the fat kid.'

'The green cross runt.'

'What do you want, little fat boy?'

They are tall, they are lean. *The Force will be with you always.*

'Leave him alone,' quivers Matt, tearful. The man is motionless on the floor, like a pile of clothes waiting to be washed.

'What are you going to do about it, eh? With your little cap gun.'

Now he's really in trouble. The hand pointing the gun is shaking. Five caps, five boys. One shot each. Except they're not really shots and they don't look much like boys from here. One of them steps towards him from the pack. He has a fine, mean face. Handsome features, a bogbrush hairdo – just

the kind of cut Dawn won't allow Matt. The boy's jeans are short and wide at the ankle. He has thin, powerful legs and arms.

'You'd better give me that.'

BANG.

Bogbrush looks panicked for a second. He jumps. There is silence, then laughter from the other boys.

BANG. BANG.

Matt turns and runs for the stairs, dropping the gun. In an instant Bogbrush is on him. He lifts him in the air by his T-shirt, punches him in the stomach and throws him into the canal. Then he kicks the cap gun in after him.

'What you do that for, idiot?' says one of his friends.

There is the sound of rapid breathing and rubber-soled boots on the metal stairs and then silence, except for the flailing of a young boy in the putrid, grey water.