

SNOT

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Daz's hawk was like listening to a jet engine taking off. It started as a dull growl from the back of his throat which quickly grew into a bubbling roar like someone was frying sausages on his tonsils. Then, with a soft wet explosion, the ball of spit soared across the classroom, arcing gracefully over the heads of several pupils before landing with a plop in the bucket beside Mr Watson's desk.

Leatherneck stopped writing midway through the word "phlegm" and snapped his head away from the whiteboard, glaring at the back of the class. I peeked over my shoulder to see Daz rocking his chair back on two legs idly chewing what was left of his last snotty projectile. He flashed the teacher a grin before noisily swallowing the mess in his mouth.

'Daniel Edwards.' I turned back to face Leatherneck Watson as the teacher spoke, the vast collar of fat around his face trembling like it always did when he was emotional. The teacher stared into the bucket with eyes as wide as pickled eggs, his cheeks turning the same shade of red as the pen he still held. 'I can't believe you just did that again.'

Here we go, I thought, watching Leatherneck's face swell up like he was about to explode. He reacted the same way every time Daz launched a spitball in his direction. You'd have thought he'd be used to it by now.

‘Congratulations!’ the teacher went on, clapping his hands together. ‘You astound me. Your production rate, your aim,’ he tipped the bucket with his foot and listened to the sound of sloshing from inside, ‘the consistency. You needn’t worry about your grades this term, Daniel, I think the school will make some new rules for our number one spitter, hm?’

A groan rippled across the class from door to window, followed by a collection of nervous snorts as several pupils tried, and failed, to form loogies of their own. I sucked some air through my nose in a vain attempt to pull some mucus into my mouth but it was no use, my throat was as dry as a bone and all I succeeded in producing was a symphony of wheezing coughs.

Mr Watson looked at me and shook his head like I’d just failed my two-times table, and I could hear Daz snigger. Everyone else was too embarrassed by their own efforts to turn in my direction, but I knew what they were thinking. *Pete can’t spit. He’s a drythroat. He’s costing us points.* And as for the girls, who’d want to date a guy who can’t even snotsnog?

My shuddering sigh was lost behind the siren announcing lunchtime. Slinging everything into my bag I joined the tide as everyone stomped towards the doors, looking back just once as I was pushed out into the corridor.

Leatherneck Watson had dipped his finger into the bucket and brought out a string of yellow phlegm which hung from his chubby digit like translucent spaghetti. After admiring it for a second he popped his finger into his mouth and sucked, the tentacle of snot disappearing between his fat lips like a snake.

Damn teachers, I thought, my stomach rumbling. Always keep the best for themselves.

* * *

As always, the lunch hall sounded like it was home to an orchestra of repulsive throat instruments all playing out of time. The bulk of the noise was coming from the far end of the huge room, where the champion spitters reclined on red velvet chairs and disgorged their own lunch onto delicate china plates.

I watched Daz stride over, watched him hawk up another snotball and bare it proudly between his teeth as he sat down next to Lisa Green, watched her conjure up a loogie of her own before pressing her lips against his. I felt my cheeks flush and turned away

just in time to see Clara head in my direction, already holding dinner plates.

‘You’re staring again,’ said Clara with a grin, nudging me playfully with her empty plate. It was bright green china, unlike the one she handed me. Mine was orange plastic. A loser plate. ‘You’ll get your chance, just give it some time.’

‘Not if I can’t even drag up half a snotter,’ I replied, staring mournfully at the circle of bright orange plastic in my hands. ‘Not if I’m always stuck in the dry line. Who wants to snotsnog someone like me?’

‘You’re obsessed with snotsnoggling!’ Clara replied with a shake of her head, turning away and walking to the back of the line. She didn’t have to queue, but she always did. ‘You know some girls don’t care about snot.’

‘Like who?’ I asked, but she didn’t reply. ‘It’s easy for you to say anyway.’

‘The virus just worked on me, that’s all,’ she said, wiping her permanently dripping nose on the collar of her school shirt. ‘It’ll work on you, just give it time.’

Just give it time. It had already been six years since my first jab. Our junior school had been in one of the first test zones, right after they'd discovered how to make snot good for you. It had been a shot in the neck every day ever since I was eight years old and still no sign that my internal mucus factory was working. I was going to be an old man still queuing up in the dry line at the local snot kitchen.

'Chin up,' came the voice of one of the dinner ladies as the line moved forwards.

'How can I keep my chin up?' I replied over my protruding bottom lip. 'My life is pointless.'

'No, chin up,' she replied, thrusting a thumb under my chin and tilting my head back so she could get the needle gun into my throat. There was a sharp pain and a hiss as the virus entered my vein. *Please let it work,* I muttered under my breath, hoping to feel a tidal wave of snot drip down through my sinuses onto the back of my tongue. But there was nothing. The inside of my mouth was still lined with sandpaper and I was still in the loser's line.

'I'll go get a table,' said Clara. 'You know you don't have to queue, you're welcome to some of mine.'

I looked through her smile to her teeth, where a golden thread of spit hung like silk. My taste buds hummed at the sight but I shook my head.

‘I’m not a snotting charity case you know.’

It was a good five minutes of shuffling and cursing before I reached the canteen. It was right at the front of the hall, raised on a platform which meant that everybody who couldn’t produce their own lunch was paraded in front of the rest of the school. We all traipsed along like condemned kids, heads down and eyes moist as the spitters watched and jeered.

‘Sweet, plain or salted?’ asked the old man behind the counter, his ladle poised over three dirty pots full of slime. It was probably store-bought snot, the worst kind. People said it came from monkeys in cages but I reckoned it was cow loogies. Cows always had wet noses.

‘Salted,’ I replied, waiting for a messy mountain of gunge to fall onto my plate before grabbing a glass of water and heading over to Clara. Despite the fact she was allowed to sit in the spitters’ zone she never did. Each and every day she sat with losers like me discretely sucking back her own snot. To an outsider, she looked like a drythroat, but she didn’t care.

‘Looks nice,’ she said as I sat down, the phlegm almost sliding off my plate like a jellyfish. I grinned at her as sarcastically as I could before scooping up a spoonful and dropping it into my mouth. The salty liquid gushed over my tongue and disappeared down my throat without me even having to swallow. Even after all these years I still had to bite back on my gag reflex.

Just don’t think about it, I said to myself. Don’t think about what you’re eating.

Clara saw me struggling and giggled, waiting until I’d dumped the second spoonful into my gob before speaking again.

‘You know, I read the other day that they round up homeless people and force them to snot up into troughs to make that stuff. Skunky old homeless snot dribbled out of crusty noses, yum!’

‘Why don’t you go sit with your spitters,’ I scowled. But I was too hungry to push my plate away.

* * *

‘So, if we look at the compounds forming ordinary mucus, and those found in modified mucus, we can see that they have been radically altered by Snook’s formula.’

I only realised I was yawning when the tail end of it groaned out over Jellybelly Jones’ lecture. I clamped my mouth shut, but fortunately she hadn’t heard me. Rearranging my posterior on the uncomfortable seat I tried to pay attention to what the teacher was saying. Not that I really needed to, we’d learned all this years ago.

‘Snook first began experimenting on the common cold in, what year?’

‘2009,’ we murmured as one, sounding like a classroom full of the living dead.

‘That’s right,’ Mrs Jones went on, her vast belly rippling each time she nodded her head. ‘And by switching certain chemical bonds within the virus he changed the way it reacted with its human host.’ She flicked a switch and the image on the whiteboard changed to show virus cells invading human ones. ‘Just as with a normal cold, the virus attacks the lining of the nose and throat, causing...’

‘Snot,’ came the zombie reply.

‘Nasal mucus, yes. But the virus reconstitutes the antiseptic enzymes so that they became not just inorganic salts and water, but...’

‘Essential vitamins, minerals and organic carbohydrates,’ we all recited.

‘The bulk of the energy needed to fuel the body therefore comes from the common cold virus, allowing us to survive on nothing more than bacteria.’ The teacher spun round and smiled expectantly at us all as if she’d been the one to invent the modified snot. ‘No more world hunger, no more deforestation to provide farmland, no more animal slaughter.’

No more food, I thought. My generation was the last one to have enjoyed hamburgers and crisps, ice cream and chocolate, even Brussels sprouts. The kids in years below me had been born into snot, they didn’t know anything else. The only glimpse they got of something tasty was in the history lessons where they watched adverts for McDonalds and KFC and learned about how food had almost destroyed the world.

‘No more fat people,’ whispered Clara from the seat beside me. I turned and grinned at her, puffing out my cheeks and flattening my chin against my chest to do an impression of Jellybelly or

Leatherneck or pretty much any of the overweight teachers at school. ‘I thought the snot diet was supposed to keep you as thin as a rake.’

‘Not when you eat as much of it as they do,’ I replied as softly as I could. ‘I’m sure they empty those buckets down their gullets as soon as we’ve left the classroom.’

As if on cue a girl in the front row quietly scraped back her chair and walked over to the snotbucket, hawking loudly before launching a golfball-sized globule of phlegm into the container. Mrs Jones patted her on the head and studied her contribution.

‘Beautiful work, Lucy. Keep those donations coming, kids, remember the more mucus you drop in these buckets, the more money the school can make and the more we can help feed the world. Not everyone can provide their own food and we’re all working hard to keep them alive!’

‘Some of us are,’ Lucy spat back as she returned to her seat, her moist eyes directed right at me.

Give me a break, I thought, waiting for her accusation to be supported by Daz or one of the other spitters. When the jeers didn’t come, however, I peered over my shoulder to see that Daz’s seat was empty. No wonder it had been so quiet this afternoon without the

permanent gargle and slush of the head spitter's dripping nasal passages.

'Where's supersnotter?' I mouthed at Clara. She peeked over her shoulder then shrugged.

'They've probably given him the afternoon off cos he's such a star.'

'Great,' I muttered, sighing loudly as someone else got up and emptied a mouthful into the bucket.

* * *

'I'm telling you this is weird,' I said the following morning as we sat down for assembly.

'You're hallucinating,' Clara replied. 'You've been sucking in too much air and your brain's gone spongy.'

I frowned and scanned the hall again, counting the rows of seats that lined the large room like ribs.

'No, twenty-two rows, there's one missing.'

‘Oh be quiet, Sponge Brain No Snot,’ Clara said, waving my suspicions away. ‘Why would they have one less row than usual?’

‘Because there are less *pupils* here than usual,’ I replied, my answer ready. ‘Where’s Daz? Where’s that kid from Year Ten who seems to cough up a whole bucket by himself every day?’

Clara brought her hand up to her face and groaned.

‘I don’t know,’ she said through her fingers. ‘Maybe they’re off on a field trip or something. You know you’re paranoid. We really need to get you snorting soon so you’ve got less time to think about stuff.’ She snorted and spat into the gutter that ran between each row, watching as the little yellow loogie sailed towards the middle of the room and merged with the fleet before gurgling down the gutter to the kitchens. ‘Nothing weird is going on, Pete, okay?’

I nodded reluctantly as the staff waddled onto the stage, Leatherneck and Jellybelly and Nine-Chins Norton the headmaster making the wooden platform creak alarmingly as they dragged their obese forms to their chairs. Their black and beady eyes scanned the hall, drifting over the first dozen rows where the most successful snotters sat.

Something in the gaze made my skin crawl, something in the way they licked their lips as they studied us. They didn’t look like

teachers watching restless pupils, they looked like diners reading a steakhouse menu, their jowls flapping in anticipation.

‘I’m telling you, this is weird,’ I repeated in a whisper, for once glad that their hungry eyes never fell on me.

* * *

‘Peter. Peter! Are you planning on joining us today or do you want to spend the entire lesson staring wistfully at Lisa Green?’

I didn’t realise the teacher was talking to me until the rest of the class exploded into a chorus of laughter and Lisa’s cheeks blazed from embarrassment. I snapped my head round and aimed my open mouth at Miss Barnstaple’s disapproving gaze.

‘What?’ I stuttered. ‘No, I wasn’t. I mean, I was thinking about snot, I was paying attention. What?’

‘Then maybe you’d like to tell us what passage we’d reached,’ Barndoor Butt said, holding the book in front of her enormous bosom. I looked down at my copy of *The Inventors and*

the Snot of Doom and poked it gently with my finger as if it would magically open on the right page.

‘Er, the middle passage?’ I ventured slowly. The teacher turned away like I was a cup of dog mucus and opened the book, addressing the rest of the class as she talked about similes and metaphors. I phased out again, my head turning to the rear of the room.

I hadn’t been staring at Lisa. Not for the entire lesson anyway. I’d been counting the number of people in the class and I’d just got distracted by the way she chewed her loogies and drew long strands of phlegm from her lips, letting them hang like necklaces of glass beads before sucking them back in.

Focus! I shouted at myself, pulling my gaze away before I was caught again. Starting at the front row I began counting. *One, two, three, no Dougie Patterson, four, five, no Jenny or Iman, six, seven, me, nine, ten, no Lucy, eleven, twelve, thirteen, no Daz, fourteen, fifteen, no Jamie and sixteen through twenty-one all present and accounted for.* That was six people missing, all champion snotters. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

I waited impatiently for the lesson to finish, failing quite spectacularly to answer any of the questions that Miss Barnstaple

hurled in my direction. I didn't care about how mucus was a metaphor for the power of friendship and how a dry nose was a symbol of villainy, I just wanted to find Clara and tell her I had proof that something strange was going on.

But an hour later when I walked into the lunch hall she was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

‘What do you want, you snotless wonder?’

I tried not to let my hurt feelings show, and instead gave a pathetic little snort as if I secretly had gallons of mucus at the back of my throat. Lisa and her friends were staring up at me from their comfy chairs, each wearing identical expressions of disgust.

‘He probably wants to stare at you again,’ said Charlie, a spiteful laugh spraying from her blocked nose.

‘Well can't he do it from the other end of the room?’ asked an older girl who might have been Lisa's sister. ‘It's pretty creepy.’

‘He *is* creepy,’ Lisa replied without taking her eyes off me. ‘That’s why we call him Peculiar Pete.’

‘Well, what do you want, Peculiar Pete the snotless wonder?’ added Charlie.

‘Er,’ I muttered. The conversation had gone on for so long without me that I’d almost forgotten why I’d walked over. I noticed the empty seat next to Lisa and remembered. ‘I was wondering if you knew where Daz was today? I haven’t seen him.’

Lisa shrugged, coughing wetly to dislodge a globule of snot before swallowing.

‘Dunno, he got called to the headmaster’s office yesterday after school for some new project. Only the best snotters get invited so I wouldn’t worry yourself.’

I mouthed the word ‘oh’ but didn’t move.

‘What about Clara, have you seen her since assembly?’

‘Why would I want to see her?’ Lisa answered with a scowl. ‘You know, she could be one of us, a champion spitter and part of the phlegm crowd. But she insists on hanging around with drythroat losers like you. It’s such a waste.’

I nodded, then shook my head, then nodded again, wondering if I could do or say something so cool that Lisa would suddenly leap from her chair and fall in love with me. Instead I opened my mouth, hiccupped noisily then spun round and shuffled back towards my seat serenaded by squeals of laughter.

It was as I was halfway across the lunch hall that I passed Flubberface Foulger, the art teacher, who waddled into the spitters' zone and made his way up to Lisa. I stopped, retracing my steps as subtly as I could to try and overhear their conversation.

'... been chosen...' Mr Foulger's high-pitched voice squeaked from his fat lips like it was desperate to escape, but I was too far away to hear everything he said. '... do your school a proud service... come right away... and well done, Lisa.'

Lisa's friends all slapped her on the back and hugged her, then she got to her feet, slung her bag over her shoulder and followed Flubberface out of the room.

I froze for just a second as I struggled to think of what to do next. But there really wasn't any choice. Clara would do everything it took to find me if I'd vanished into thin air, so I had to do the same for her – even if it meant being forced to clean the canteen snopots as a punishment.

I ran back to my table and grabbed my bag, then set off in pursuit, keeping an eye on Flubberface's massive butt as he stomped out of the lunch hall. I followed at a discrete distance, pretending to study the mucus information posters as I made my way down the corridor. Lisa and the teacher reached the staff room but to my surprise – and hers too judging by her expression – they walked right past and stopped outside the basement door.

Using the numerous bookcases and filing cabinets against the wall as cover I crept down the dark corridor until I was spitting distance away. Praying that I wouldn't be seen, I peeked my head out in time to hear Lisa finish a question.

‘The basement?’

‘Ah yes, my dear,’ squeaked Mr Foulger. ‘Don't be nervous, we've turned the whole area into a new science lab for this project. You'll love it down there. Besides,’ he leaned forwards, his gargantuan belly almost sliding down to his knees as he ruffled her hair, ‘Daniel is there, and many more of your fellow champions. You'll feel right at home.’

‘If you say so,’ Lisa replied, her jaw champing nervously at a ball of spit. Flubberface pulled a loop of keys from his pocket and opened three massive locks on the basement door. He flashed a grin

at Lisa, and in the half-light of the corridor his teeth stood out against his shadowed face like the crescent of the Moon.

‘Just follow the stairs down, dear,’ he said, his entire body jiggling with excitement. ‘Someone will be there to greet you.’

Then he twisted the handle and pushed open the door, unleashing the clockwork thump of machines and the roar of throats all snorting in unison.

But I could make out another sound over the tap of Laura’s feet on the stairs, something that chilled me to the bone.

It was the unmistakable pitch of a human scream, rising from the basement and hanging in the air for no more than a second before it was lost behind the thud of locks and the low, rumbled laughter of Mr Foulger as he disappeared down the corridor.

* * *

I spent the rest of the day frantically racking my brains for a plan, but no matter how hard I tried nothing presented itself. For all I knew there really was a secret scientific lab down in the basement that only

the elite spitters were granted access to. Maybe the screaming I'd heard was the shriek of gears or the whine of pipes as the chosen ones worked their way towards better grades and fantastic exam results. Maybe I was just being a sponge-brained idiot like Clara had said.

Yet I couldn't stop thinking that something terrible was going on, something unspeakable right beneath my feet, something that involved my best – my only – friend. And the way that Old Wobbler Warburton sat back in his chair, his monstrous belly spilling out in every direction as he devoured us with his piggy eyes, only made me more convinced.

I waited for an hour after the final siren, hiding in the bushes opposite the main gate in the hope that I'd see Clara – or Daz or Lisa or any of the missing names – emerge from the basement. But even as the cold sun dipped beyond the houses, and the streetlights turned the steady drizzle to flecks of diamond, the school looked as lifeless as a morgue.

Except for the clutter of cars that sat on the far side of the playground, that was, huddling beneath a sign that read *Teacher's Parking Only*. Whatever was going on, it looked like every member of staff was involved.

A real hero would have marched right back into school and beaten down the basement door, knocking the obese teachers unconscious before carrying everyone else to safety. Yet there I was, fourteen and couldn't even spit yet. Maybe if I'd been a snorter, maybe then I could have done something. But I wasn't. I was a drythroat, a loser. And I did the only thing I could think of doing. I ran home and told my mum.

* * *

‘Look, I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense. I just want you to get the hell out of my dining room before our guests arrive.’

I should have guessed what her response would be. Although she never said it, she was ashamed of me enough as it was. I didn’t need to start throwing around accusations and inventing wild conspiracies to get in her bad books. Even if she had thought there was a grain of truth to what I was saying she wouldn’t have cared, not tonight when she was having one of her little snot parties.

‘But I really think there’s something bad going on,’ I tried again.

‘You should do as your mum says, Peter,’ my dad cut in, wiping his nose with his finger then scraping the gooey mess onto the rim of a bowl. ‘We’ve still got some dishes to make and you never know, they might arrive early.’

‘They’re bringing their son,’ Mum went on. ‘He’s only eleven but he’s already producing first class mucus. He can probably help his parents prepare dinner rather than just leech off them.’

‘Did you have your jab today?’ asked Dad, his expression both pained and hopeful. I stared at the table, at the feast of phlegm my parents had already prepared from their own nasal passages. I couldn’t meet their eyes.

‘Of course I did. I have my shot every day. It just doesn’t work.’

‘Well until it does we want you upstairs when we have guests,’ said Mum, hawking another shot of snot onto a plate. ‘You’re an embarrassment to us, to your school and to Quintus Snook.’

I turned and ran from the room, tripping up the stairs and slamming my bedroom door behind me. Curled up on my duvet I let the tears come, the salty fluid running in my nose and down my throat and letting me pretend for a short while that I was producing

mucus. But the tears dried up, as they always did, leaving me once again with nothing. *A nothing.*

Snot isn't the most important thing in the world you know. I could hear Clara's voice in my head and I sat up, wiping the last drops of moisture from my eyes. Under normal circumstances I'd have called her right now, she always knew just how to cheer me up. Maybe she'd be home by now.

I picked up my mobile and pressed my only speed-dial setting. It rang for almost a minute before the line diverted from her mobile to her house phone. Two more rings and I heard the nasal tones of her mother.

'Foreman residence,' she sniffed. 'Moira speaking.'

'Hi Mrs Foreman,' I said. 'Is Clara there?'

'Is that you, Pete? How's the spitting coming along?' She didn't wait for an answer. 'No she's not here. The school rang, they're running a field trip for a few days. She won't be back until next Tuesday. It's a shame you weren't invited, but then you aren't—'

I didn't hang on to hear the insult but snapped my mobile shut. That did it. There was no way Clara would agree to a weeklong

field trip, especially not one spent in the school basement. She was in trouble.

I launched myself off the bed, grabbing a dark hoodie from my wardrobe and digging out the torch from beneath by chest of drawers. I scanned the room for anything I could use to defend myself if the worst came to the worst, but all I could see was a Snotman action figure and my guitar. Slipping a couple of Mucus Treats into my pocket in case I got hungry, I made my escape.

My parents were arguing about something in the dining room and didn't hear me ease open the front door. Leaving it open I bounced down the steps and sprinted back towards the school. The gates were closed, but I followed the fence round to the crumbling wall by the bike sheds and hoisted myself over the collapsed brickwork.

Getting myself into the basement wasn't going to be easy, especially as the school was shut fast against the freezing night. But the building was ancient, and there were several routes that led down into its guts, all left over from the days before it was powered by gas and electricity.

Pulling my hood up and tightening it around my face, I dashed across the playground, past the teachers' cars and around the

back of the maintenance shed. Fortunately the abandoned coal chute was drenched in shadow, and I was nothing more than a ghost as I pried away at the rotten wood. With a splintered crack the lock popped free, allowing me to pull one of the large doors up and peer inside.

The basement stared back at me with one black, bottomless eye. I couldn't hear anything – no machines, no snorts, certainly no screams. It was like the doors opened up into a vast abyss, an eternity of nothingness that would swallow me whole if I dared put so much as a foot inside. I yanked the torch from my pocket and aimed the feeble beam of light into the hole, but all it succeeded in doing was turning the fringes of the chute a slightly less terrifying shade of black.

I swallowed hard, hoping I could get rid of the taste of fear that had polluted my mouth. My heart was hammering so urgently it felt like every single teacher in the school was waltzing over my chest, making it hard to breath and even harder to move.

This was a mistake, I knew it was. If I was wrong, if there really wasn't anything strange going on and they caught me breaking and entering like this, then I'd be expelled. If I didn't go to school then I wouldn't keep getting my jabs. And if I didn't get them then

I'd never, ever be able to produce my own snot. My life would be over.

But if there *was* something going on...

I thought of Clara, about everything we'd been through together. And I thought about her alone, scared. Then I held my breath, counted to five, and stepped down into the darkness.

* * *

The first thing I realised was that the chute wasn't endless. In fact after less than a second of falling I ploughed bottom first into something extremely hard and painful. That was the second thing I realised – that the coal cellar wasn't abandoned. Nursing my bruised bum and raising my torch I saw that the large room was stuffed with hundreds of boxes, each labelled 'Super Strength Snook Viral Initiator'.

I picked up the nearest container and squinted at the warning plastered in giant letters on the back. *Hazardous substance*, I repeated in my head. *Not to be given without doctor's consent. Excessive use may be fatal.*

That wasn't a good sign.

Weaving my way around the stacks of boxes I made my way to the door, pressing my ear against the cold metal to check that the coast was clear. Now that I was in the basement I could make out the same strange sounds I had heard before. Except I couldn't so much hear them as feel them. The very foundations of the school seemed to be vibrating like it had a heartbeat, a relentless beat that could only have been made by a huge machine.

Confident that there was nothing living on the other side of the door I lifted the catch and pulled it open. Through the crack I saw a bare corridor, lit by one lonely bulb, leading off into the shadows beneath the main school building. There was nothing there except cobwebs and the odd disinterested spider, but the sounds were louder now, and out here I swear I could hear distant screams like invisible phantoms haunting the ancient bricks.

My legs felt like they were made of snot, but I took another deep, shuddering breath and pressed on. The corridor was longer than it looked, and with each halting step I took the noises ahead grew louder. I felt like I was walking into the stomach of some evil beast, its guts churning and clanking all around me and accompanied by its endless, ground-shaking pulse.

It's weird what your imagination can conjure up when you're really, really scared.

It took me at least five minutes to reach the far end of the corridor, where I found myself face to face with another door. Pressing my ear to this one I realised that whatever I was hearing, it lay on the other side of the smooth metal. I could also make out another sound, a tapping that gradually grew louder until it sounded like it was –

I threw myself to the side just in time, the footsteps dying out to be replaced by the clack of a key in the lock. The door flew open and I covered behind it, watching as a behemoth of flesh and corduroy rocked past. It was Leatherneck, his enormous bulk almost touching both sides of the corridor as he made his way towards the coal cellar.

If he turned around now he'd see me, so without thinking I ducked round the door and into the room beyond. Fortunately by that time the teacher was out of earshot, because what I saw in front of me made me groan in pure terror.

I was obviously in the basement's storeroom, a vast, vaulted chamber that stretched up into darkness far above my head and ended in distant shadows. Dominating the huge space was an enormous vat

– easily the height and width of an entire house. It was this which was making such a din, the entire frame vibrating as if some huge engine was inside. Pipes stuck out from several places on its rough metal exterior, each whining and shaking as it poured chunks of clear liquid into barrels.

It was snot, more than I'd ever seen in my life. Gallons of it, gushing from this vast vat like ambrosia from heaven. I would have taken a closer look, maybe even ventured a taste, was in not for the fact that the vat was also the source of something else.

The screams.

They blossomed from the very top of the vat, dropping from the shadows like banshees – ear piercing shrieks of terror that seemed to have no end. It was all I could do not to turn and flee, only I knew that Clara was up there somewhere, with only the darkness to hear her cries.

I poked my head back round the door I'd come through to see that Leatherneck was still wobbling down the corridor. Checking to make sure there was no one else in the room, I sprinted towards the vat, running around its curved base until I spotted a reinforced metal staircase bolted into the side. The vat was vibrating so much that I

was afraid the stairs would be shaken loose, but I tried to put the thought from my mind as I charged to the top.

Nothing that my imagination had presented me with could come close to what I found when I hit the last few steps. The first thing I saw was a thin metal grille which covered the entire top of the vat. Above this, around the circumference of the giant pot, were at least fifty weird harnesses that looked like something you'd wear to go potholing.

Only these weren't designed for fun. Strapped into fifteen of the harnesses were the screamers. I spotted Daz first, his hands and legs bound tight and his mouth wide open as he called for help. Fixed into his neck was a thick tube filled with purple liquid which gradually bubbled its way into his vein.

I knew immediately what it was: Super Strength Snook Viral Initiator. And there was no mistaking what it was doing to him. Snot was gushing from Daz's nose with more force than the Niagara Falls, practically flooding through the grille into the vat below. There was so much of it that he looked as if his insides were melting, the mucus spewing so copiously that he was having trouble breathing.

'Oh. My. God,' I said, although the noise in the room was so loud that I wasn't sure if I'd actually spoken. I let my eyes circle the

other prisoners, spotting Lisa next to her boyfriend, then the kid from year ten, and Doogie and Jamie and Iman, all vomiting snot into the vat beneath their feet. The others were covered in so much phlegm, their mouths so distorted by their fear, that I couldn't even identify them.

'Pete,' the noise was less a word than a gargle, and it had to be repeated three times before I could make out who said it. It was Clara, mounted on the opposite side of the vat to where I stood frozen, her expression of disbelief masked by several layers of gunge.

I shook myself free from my paralysis and ran over to her, trying to ignore the torrent of snot that exploded over my face as I came within sneezing distance.

'Sorry,' she bubbled. I pulled my sleeve over my hand and wiped the mess from her mouth. Then I grabbed the purple needle and gently eased it from her neck. She winced, her face turning so pale that I thought she was going to pass out.

'What the hell is going on?' I asked. 'What are they doing to you?'

‘No time,’ she wheezed, blowing the last drops of mucus from her nose. ‘Leatherneck will be back any moment, and the rest of them are here. You’ve got to go and get help.’

‘I’m not leaving you,’ I shouted over the clank of the vat. I reached up and pulled at the buckle which bound her arms, sliding the leather strap free. But Clara shook her head frantically.

‘Forget me,’ she said. ‘If you don’t get out now then they’ll catch you too. They’ll kill you, Pete. They won’t risk you telling the world what’s happening. Just go!’

‘Oh, I think it’s a little too late for that, hm?’ came a voice from behind me. I saw who had spoken reflected in the whites of Clara’s eyes, but I spun round anyway. Leatherneck was standing at the top of the stairs on the other side of the grille, a box of Super Strength Snook Viral Initiator in his hands. The fat on his face was twisted up into a smile that made him look like a piece of rotten fruit which had collapsed in on itself. ‘You know our little secret now, Peter, hm? What to do. What to do.’

My entire body was locked tight with terror, but I managed to hold Leatherneck’s gaze and stutter out a question.

‘What are you doing, you monster?’ I hissed, my words barely lifting themselves over the clank of the vat and the constant rush of snot from the other kids. ‘You’re killing them.’

Leatherneck looked back down the stairs he had just climbed and motioned with his arm. I heard the thud of giant footsteps as his reinforcements approached. There was nowhere to run, the stairs were the only way back down.

‘It’s fairly obvious, isn’t it,’ boomed Leatherneck when he finally returned his attention to me. ‘Even to a half-witted drythroat like you. We’re harvesting mucus.’ He gestured towards Daz, who stared back at him like a rabbit in a trap. ‘Your fellow pupils were doing a fairly average job of producing snot. We had enough to feed us and a little left over to sell for profit. But was it enough, hm? No, because of lazy snotless freaks like you we were falling behind quota.’

‘You think it’s easy living on a teacher’s salary?’ came a wheezing squeal from behind Leatherneck as Flubberface Foulger appeared, his corpulent body breaching the top of the vat like a whale. ‘We wanted a little extra cash, and a little extra something for our stomachs. And you know how tasty first class mucus is.’

‘So we picked our best snotters and pumped them full of Initiator,’ Leatherface went on, letting Mr Foulger catch his breath as he clambered onto the grille. Behind him I could see the untidy mop of hair that crowned Jellybelly Jones’ sweaty head. ‘It increases mucus production by over twenty times. It’s truly remarkable.’

‘But you’re killing them,’ I repeated. I could feel a tickle at the back of my throat, a pressure in my nose, and wondered if the terror was doing bad things to my body. It would be just my luck if this experience meant I could never produce mucus. Not that it looked like I had much of a future right now. ‘You can’t keep them like this.’

‘Oh boo hoo,’ said Flubberface, taking a step towards me. ‘Not our problem, Peter. They’re giving up their lives for a noble cause. Me!’

‘We can keep them here for days before parents start to get suspicious,’ Leatherneck went on. ‘By that time they’ll have filled hundreds of gallons with beautiful phlegm. And once we’ve got pupils in all the harnesses we’ll be the country’s number one producer of grade A mucus.’

‘We’ll be millionaires,’ said Jellybelly as she reached the top of the stairs. Behind her I could see Old Wobbler Warburton, and

past him was the headmaster himself looking like he was about to have a heart attack from the climb.

‘And we’ll never go hungry again,’ Foulger added, patting his belly as though proud of the way it hung over his belt like an immense sack of flour.

‘But what to do with you, hm?’ repeated Leatherneck. ‘If only a spitter could have entered our little lair then we could just string you up with the rest. As it is though...’ He left the sentence unfinished and looked to Nine-Chins Norton to confirm my fate. The headmaster wheezed like a dying engine then nodded, his collection of chins flapping as he condemned me.

‘Let the drythroat die. Foulger, do the deed please.’

Flubberface was still making his way slowly towards me but there was no way I could escape. The staircase was blocked by several obese bodies and jumping from the top of the vat would mean certain death. I turned to Clara, sniffing to clear the back of my throat. The tickle was still there and it was driving me insane.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, wiping my hand across my nose. I was crying again, the tears running down my face and dripping from my chin. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Clara was crying too, but they didn't look like tears of sadness. She smiled at me, her eyes bloodshot but glinting as if the very sun was shining from them.

'What?' I asked, snorting to remove a blockage from my sinuses. 'I don't know what you can be happy about at this precise moment.'

'You're snotting,' she said with a laugh. 'It's happened, you've finally caught cold.'

I spat out a mouthful of mucus in order to tell her she was crazy but stopped midway through the first word. Something was definitely happening. My parched throat felt like it was being soothed from within, a delicious liquid dripping down onto the back of my tongue. I sniffed, and for the first time in my life I felt something soft and squishy squirm down my nasal passages into my mouth.

I swallowed, the capsule of mucus gliding down my throat towards my stomach – not someone else's snot, my own!

'I'm snotting,' I said, my eyes filling. 'I'm not a loser any more. I'm not a drythroat!'

Clara's smile broadened for the briefest of moments then disappeared as she looked over my shoulder.

'Typical timing though, Pete,' she muttered.

I turned round again to see that Mr Foulger was half way across the grille. He stopped moving when he saw my dripping face, gazing at me in surprise.

'You're spitting,' he murmured, licking his lips. 'Well I never, what luck. Looks like you'll be joining your friends for a little while.'

Leatherneck had spotted my change too and had started wobbling across the grille in my direction, his hands held out like a zombie.

'I'll get him, Frank,' he said. 'I like the look of his mucus, freshly produced. How about it, hm?'

'Uh uh,' Foulger replied, increasing his speed. Behind the rattle and clank of the vat I heard something snap, the grille lurching down a couple of inches suddenly enough to make me lose my balance. I reached out and grabbed Clara's leg to stop myself tumbling over the edge. Leatherneck was gaining ground on

Flubberface, but their competition had created the spark of an idea in my freshly gushing head.

‘Are you going to let these two losers have all the fun?’ I shouted out across the vat. ‘And I thought the headmaster got all the best treats.’

Nine-Chins seemed to stir at my comment, his face flapping from side to side as he realised what I was saying. He lurched forwards like a steam train, gradually building up speed as he chugged in my direction.

‘The boy’s right,’ he bellowed. ‘Frank, Bill, I should get first taste. Let me through.’

‘You always get first taste, Gordon,’ Leatherneck replied. ‘This one’s mine.’

The grille groaned as the three immense bodies pounded across it, the metal straining with their weight. But the joints were holding.

I sucked in through my nose with as much strength as I could muster, pulling everything I had into my mouth. I snorted again, and again, until a veritable lake of snot rested against my tongue. Then,

with tears of joy running down my cheeks, I did the only thing that I'd ever truly wanted to do.

I spat.

The glorious bubble of mucus launched from my mouth like a shuttle, the tennis-ball-sized missile seeming to expand and contract in midair as it shot towards the centre of the vat. Time seemed to slow down as it reached the apex of its majestic curve, every single pair of eyes in the room following its progress.

Foulger was the first to move, diving towards the snotty lump with his mouth open. With twin howls of hunger Nine-Chins and Leatherneck both thrust their bodies in the direction the spitball was falling. Fuelled by greed, the remaining teachers on the edge of the grille all charged forwards, desperate to taste my loogie.

There was chaos as they collided in the centre of the grille, fleshy arms and legs in orbit around vast bodies, gaping mouths and gaping eyes never turning away from the phlegmy treat.

The strain was too much. With a howl that sounded almost human one side of the grille tore free from the vat. The teachers all froze as they realised what was happening, my heroic ball of snot passing all of them and dropping through the metal mesh into the bubbling pool beneath.

Then, with another groaning crunch, the grille cracked down the middle and the obese bodies sprawled over it followed my mucus into the vat. I wrapped my arms around Clara's legs as the platform gave way, watching in horror as six vast, flailing forms hit the surface with a sickening squelch.

For a minute or two they squirmed and screamed in unison, but eventually each fat face sank beneath the rippling mucus, their wet eyes glaring at me with fury as they grew ever paler, then vanished. Leatherneck was the last one to go, chomping furiously at the liquid around him as if he could eat his way to safety. But even his monstrous appetite was no use, and eventually the desperate sound of swallowing faded beneath the endless clank of the pipes.

I stretched out my legs and found the rim of the vat, keeping hold of Clara to steady myself. The walls of the container were almost two feet thick, wide enough to walk on without fear of falling to either side. Pulling again on the leather straps that bound her I freed her feet then her arms, helping her down.

'Now that,' she said when she had recovered her breath. 'Is how you snot.'

I grinned, relishing the feeling of mucus dripping from my nostrils over my lips. Each of the other prisoners was watching me

with wide-eyed relief, the liquid phlegm still gushing from them as if to make sure that the teachers below were well and truly buried.

‘Wanna help me cut them down?’ I asked Clara. She nodded, grabbing my jumper and getting unsteadily to her feet.

‘You betcha,’ she said, delicately wiping my lips with her fingers. ‘Then let’s get out of here and find a hospital. God knows what that stuff has done to my insides.’ She peered down into the gooey mess below, shaking her head. ‘What should we do about them?’

I stared into the vat of snot then back at Clara. I couldn’t care less what happened to the teachers. I couldn’t care less about anything. I was finally a snorter, I wasn’t a loser any more. The world was my loogie and for the first time in my life I could see my future stretched out before me like one beautiful, unbroken strand of phlegm. Taking Clara’s hand I led her towards the next harness and laughed.

‘Snot my problem.’