

Hidden in the Shadows

If I'd have known what would've happened, I wouldn't have done it. Or maybe I would've done it, who knows? But I don't think I would've. I didn't mean to cause trouble, at least I don't think I did, but I can't really remember now so maybe Miss Lucy's right. Maybe I am a troublemaker. That would explain why I'm in the "Crisis Room," arms pinned to my chest, tight, like the way Ma hugs when she comes to visit.

I don't like this room. Not the blank walls. Not the slick tiled floor. Definitely not the roly bed with sheets so white the bleach seeps right into your skin. I tell Ma that's why I'm so pale but she just nods and twirls the cowlick at the back of my head. Not that I'm in here all the time. Usually I'm in my bedroom playing video games on the flatscreen Ma brought for me, a symbol of her guilt for locking me in this oversized cage. Unless Walter's in there. Walter likes to talk, even when no one's around. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. I feel bad for the crazy son of a bitch, has to be separated in class and everything. I feel bad for me too, stuck dealing with it till he falls asleep.

That's why I go around looking for ways out. I like to think of myself as a modern day Daniel Boone. Sometimes I introduce myself as Daniel, but Ma corrects me every time. "Your name is Jacob," she'll say. And then I'll say, "Today it's Daniel." And she'll say, "What's wrong with Jacob?" looking all sad. And then I'll feel bad and say, "Okay I'm Jacob," but when I'm exploring I'm Daniel. Today I was Daniel and ended up in here.

I haven't smelled this ammonia-infested box in two years. Not since my fist "accidentally" gave Eric a black eye. That's how I ended up in Walter's room to begin with. He was nonthreatening, wouldn't pull any of my triggers, at least that what the doctors told Ma as I sat

there invisible to them. It wouldn't have happened if he'd just left my stuff alone. They hadn't used the "calm coat" that time. This was a first.

They must know I'm close to my big discovery. That's why they're always so watchful, their eyes glued to the back of my head every time I turn around. The only time they leave me alone is when Ma comes, but then her eyes follow me instead of theirs and with them comes her constant worry. She's always saying she's sorry she can't take me home with her, promising she will once they find a way to "calm me down." When she first brought me here, she'd told me I'd only be here for a little while, till the doctors helped with my outbursts. She didn't realize I could hear her talking to the doctors outside the psychiatrist's room.

"It could take a while to get to the root of the problem," they'd said.

"He's not a bad boy," she'd told them. "He just doesn't know how to handle his emotions."

"How long has he been displaying violence?"

"About a year now, but it doesn't happen all the time."

"And the delusions?"

"I wouldn't call them delusions," she'd said quickly. "He just has a vivid imagination."

The doctors didn't respond but I could hear their pens scratching away at their notepads. "We'll see what we can do," they'd finally said.

That was the last time I'd been alone. They even stand on the other side of the curtain as I shower and I can feel their eyes boring through the thin plastic. But I had known when they were too busy with the other kids to notice me sneaking off, tiptoeing my way to the forbidden room with quick glances over my shoulder to make sure I wasn't being followed. Quickly making my way down the dimly lit corridors, past each windowed door as the noise of the learning room

grew further and further away. I made it to the heavy metal door, the only door on this floor without a window, the same door that taunted me every day as we passed it on the way to lunch, calling out for me. Jordan says it's where they keep the machine that sucks the crazy right out of the real head-cases. Eric heard that someone was murdered in there and that's why they don't use it anymore. When I ask Ms. Lucy, she tells me, "It's just an old bedroom, nothing special about it." But there has to be something special about it, otherwise why would they keep it locked up?

I'd pressed my ear to the door listening for a clue from the other side, but no sound emerged from the metal. I'd even managed to stick the bent paper clip into one of the locks and I swear the steel pulsed with excitement. Then a hand clutched my shoulder sending me into a fit of panic and frustration. I turned, hurling my limbs at my repressor.

"Jacob calm down," Miss Lucy said and I would've if she had been anyone else. But Miss Lucy was mean, always telling me "don't do this" and "don't do that." So I kept swatting at her and when she pinned my arms down by my sides, I kicked her straight in the shin. That's when she'd pressed the button calling for the other teachers and doctors who brought me into this room, where there's no clock, no window, no sound. No way to know how long I've been in here or how much longer I still have to go.

I try to do the math in my head figuring I've been in here for at least twenty minutes. That means ten more. I began counting the seconds. When I reach 482, the door groans open and my eyes struggle against the flooding light. Miss Margaret kneels in front of me, looking me right in the eye.

"Jacob, we don't hit," she says softly but using her stern voice and I nod, dipping my gaze to the floor. "And we don't kick either." I sit silently swinging my legs back and forth. "Jacob..."

“I know, I’m sorry,” I say looking up.

Miss Margaret smiles warmly and unclips the jacket, freeing my arms from their forced embrace. I remain seated on the stiff bed as she returns it to the hook on the front of the door.

“Come on,” she says holding out her hand. “You’re gonna miss recess if you don’t hurry up.”

I jump down from the bed and grab her hand, smiling now. I like Miss Margaret. She’s real pretty with long brown hair and bright blue eyes that meet yours when you’re talking to her, so you know she’s really listening. And she actually plays with us, invents games to keep us entertained on days when it’s too wet to go outside. Plus she says I’m pretty darn smart and I can’t help but agree. And I’ve never seen her put anyone in the “Crisis Room,” not even Maggie who’s always throwing fits.

Everyone’s already playing or sitting or reading or talking to themselves when Miss Margaret leads me outside. Eric and Jordan are playing checkers underneath the slide, and they call me over to join them, but I go over to the row of bushes that stand in front of the building instead. I walk behind them, between them and the building so no one can see me. Moving deliberately, I walk three paces to the right, mark an “X” by digging the heel of my shoe into the dirt, kneel next to the spot, and begin digging, the moist mulch leaving its woody scent on my palms. It doesn’t take long; the book’s only buried deep enough so no one can see it.

I brush the dirt off the plastic bag and remove the book, revealing the title: Treasure Island. This is the only thing I have here that no one knows about, not even Ma. I like that. I found it in this exact spot a week after I first arrived, the only sign of its previous owner etched into the back of the cover: “DB”. I scan over the pages now rereading my favorite parts, saving

the picture of the map for last. When I flip to the page, my stomach drops to my toes. The map's blocked by a long white envelope with "Jacob" scribbled on the front.

I look around to see if anyone's watching. No one but the bushes. Carefully, I slip my finger into the top of the envelope, sliding it along the crease as the paper tears. The letter's written in blue marker on a piece of red construction paper like the kind we use during art time:

*Go to the room at night, when Walter's asleep, there's only 1
doctor on then
Use the paper clip you stole from Miss Lucy's desk to pick the lock
on your door
Don't forget to put some pillows under the covers in case Walter
wakes up or someone looks in the window
Don't wear shoes, too much noise
DO NOT FORGET TO SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND YOU
Use the paper clip to open the door to the forbidden room
There's a cabinet on the left, open the doors and empty it out
Pry off the back part of the cabinet
That reminds me DON'T FORGET A FLASHLIGHT
Go*

-Daniel

"Jiminy Crickets!" I say out loud without really meaning to. I quickly slam my hand over my mouth, peeking my head out of the bush to make sure no one's heard. The coast is clear. My heart's beating like the wings of the hummingbirds that gather on the feeder Miss Margaret hung, and I force myself to breathe the way they tell us to during an episode. The sweat from my palms is soaking the paper so I fold it carefully and place it back in its envelope.

A zillion questions run through my mind now, spinning so fast my brain sloshes back and forth. How'd they find my book? How'd they know it was mine? Go where? AND WHO THE HECK IS THIS OTHER DANIEL?

I hear the crunch of a twig and quickly stash the note in the band of my underwear. Then I scramble to bury the book and wait to be discovered. But no one comes. I poke my head out and see Brandon taking a whiz three bushes over. Panicked and slightly disgusted, I sneak out through the side before he draws attention.

When Miss Margaret calls us in for music time, I try to act normal but the note's scratching at my skin and then I can't think with Brandon banging away at the drum. So I sit, twiddling the recorder, impatiently waiting for tonight.

At dinner I shovel the food into my mouth so fast I don't even taste the scorched riblets or freezer-burned peas. And at bedtime when Dr. George hands me my meds I swallow them without argument. But I still have to wait for Walter to fall asleep and I swear he's taking forever, going on and on about the aliens that'll abduct him as soon as he closes his eyes. "There coming," he says over and over. Every now and then I tell him the aliens aren't coming tonight, but he just ignores me and starts humming some song he's made up.

I'm getting antsy and I don't know how much more of this I can take. I can feel the anger rising up. I know it's not Walter's fault, but hasn't he heard of self-control? The doctors talk to me about it all the time. Tell me to close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Think before you act," they say. So that's what I try to do now, but all I'm really thinking about is making Walter shut the heck up.

I stare at him, using the power of my mind to force him to sleep. It doesn't work. His thin lips move over his buck teeth at rapid speed, making hushed words I can't quite understand. His hands remained clenched as they sit on his broad chest and his dark hair moves slightly as he rocks his head up and down.

It's another fifteen minutes before his humming turns into loud snoring and his head finally comes to rest on the pillow. I tiptoe over, making sure his black beady eyes aren't following me, but he seems to be asleep, twitching every so often as the aliens probe him. I grab the flashlight off the bureau and pluck off the paperclip held to the back by two pieces of tape arranged in an "X". I check the note one more time.

Pillows. How could I forget the pillows? I take the two at the head of my bed and delicately place them under the plaid comforter, careful not to make them too fluffy. I'm a skinny boy and I want to make sure it's believable. I snuggle Herbert underneath for good measure. One final check of the note and I'm out of the room, shutting the door quietly behind me.

There's no one around, but a radio plays softly behind the front desk next to the wall across from me. I don't walk. Instead, I slide along the freshly waxed tiles silently in the shadows of window light. The cold metal door is at the end of the hall, just around the corner. I duck past the first three doors without a hitch. The fourth one's the problem. It leads to Dr. Gallagher's office and the light's still shining bright. I press myself close to the wall, trying to see through the small glass square drilled into the door. The view only shows one side of the room: a bookshelf filled with big thick books and a long couch where his patients tell him about the voices in their heads. I can't see the wall that his desk sits against. After a moment's thought, I inhale deeply, drop down, and crawl past the door.

I wait till I'm at least three feet from the door and then rise slowly. My heart's punching my chest hard as I stand there waiting for Dr. Gallagher's bug-eyed glasses to appear at the window. But they don't and brief relief floods my body until I realize how much there's still to do.

Still pressed tightly to the wall, I peek my head around the corner, making sure no one's there to stop me. The path to the door is filled with nothing but shadows. Again, I sneak past each room undetected by those dreaming inside them. The door looks different in the night's light, tall and heavy in its coat of armor, its dark face meaner, as it guards a world of mystery.

I click the flashlight on to get a good look at the two locks. With the paperclip that now looks more like an upside-down "T", I manage to pop the pad lock off in less than ten seconds. The deadbolt's a little trickier. My cleverly made lock pick won't fit in the smaller hole so I have to improvise. After I shove the flashlight into my armpit, I go to work on the paperclip, unfolding it into a straight piece of thin metal. Using an old trick Ricky taught me before he was shipped from here to juvy, I make a key out of the wire, creating small squiggles on one end and a triangular handle on the other. There's a click when I jiggle this "key" around in the lock and the handle no longer resists when I turn it.

I keep the handle turned all the way to the right and gently push against the door, but it doesn't budge. I try again, leaning my hip into it this time. Slowly the door slides in, making small squeaks of protest. I throw my hip against the metal one last time and it gives a final shout as it bursts open sending me tumbling into the room. I stay unmoving on the floor afraid the noise has already alerted the doctor of my presence. My ears strain to hear the faintest sound of movement in the hall.

Nothing, I hear nothing but my own breathing, but then...footsteps. The rhythmic clanking is unmistakable against the hard tiled floor. My pulse quickens as I sit paralyzed. I'm trying to figure out what to do, but my mind's scattered and I can't collect my thoughts. My nails dig into my palms and I force myself to listen. I realize the sound's growing quieter. Whoever it is is walking away!

I wait till silence fills the room before I grab the flashlight beside me and rise to my feet, shutting the door to the world behind me. It's the first time I've ever seen this room and I'm thoroughly unimpressed. I look for the machine with the magical cure but it's nowhere to be found. I search for signs of death, for signs of the room's previous occupant, but again I come up empty. I don't know what I expected to find, but it wasn't this, it wasn't an ordinary room like Ms. Lucy had told me time and time again. The twin-sized bed looks like the one in my own room, except this one is stripped bare without even the mandatory white sheets covering the plastic blue mattress. The bureau pressed against the back wall matches my own with its maple wood, as does the ugly lamp that sits on top of it. The egg-shell colored walls are not splattered with blood from a murder scene, instead they mimic the ones that trap me with Walter. As I scan the room, a large wooden cabinet catches my eye. It looks like the armoire in Ma's room at home (except without the heavy draws), with doors as tall as me.

I unfold the note carefully, jumping a little at every crinkling sound, sure that it will wake someone through the thinly plastered walls. The blue writing is hard to see in the windowless room so I hold the flashlight close and bring the note below my nose. "There's a cabinet on the left, open the doors and empty it out," it says.

I don't know what I wanted to see behind the thin wooden doors but again I'm disappointed when I look inside. The shelf-less interior holds nothing but dusty books covered by a pile of filthy linens. The linens form a gray mountain on the cold floor as I begin emptying the cabinet. I remove the books three at a time, their grime coating my skin. Before long there's nothing but light from the flashlight and broken up shadows inside, painting a map like the one in the book—the shadows the dark waters of the unknown, the light the safety of land.

“Pry off the back part of the cabinet,” I read now. After setting the flashlight on the floor of the cabinet, I claw at the thin plywood that makes up its back wall. It’s not working. My nails aren’t long enough to fit in the thin space next to the edge.

My eyes scan the room for something that’ll provide enough leverage to pop the back off. The room’s bare except for the scattered furniture. The bureau, there must be something in the bureau. The top drawer’s empty, so is the second one. The third’s filled with nothing but a musty scent. Panic tightens my chest. There’s only one drawer left. I close my eyes as I grip the brass handle and pull back gently.

I force myself to open my right eye, just enough to see a dark shadow against the pale lining of the drawer. My left eye shoots open to get a better look and I let out the breath I’d been holding in. At first I only see a small can of wall putty for fixing holes punched by unruly “students.” Then my heart jumps as my eyes catch sight of the dull metal laced with dried putty. It’s a putty knife and it’s absolutely perfect. The metal is just small enough to fit in the crack and with a couple jerks of the handle, I’m able to pop the plywood off.

The rectangle before me is darker than the rest of the wall, so I pick the flashlight up for a better look. Now I see that it’s not part of the wall at all and for a minute I think it’s a safe filled with my own very small island of treasure, with golden coins identical to those Ben unburied on the island. But the slightly rotting wood would serve little protection against thieves and the light from the flashlight reflects off an ancient-looking knob. The cabinet squeaks as I step inside and I inhale deeply, the smell of rain flooding my nostrils. My hands run over the “X”s carved into the wood and they cool my skin. I bring the light close to the knob whose gold is dulled with age but the words engraved in a circle are clear: “Fear’s the spice that makes it interesting to go ahead.”

There's something familiar about the words, but I can't quite put the pieces together. I grasp the knob tightly but can't find the courage to turn it. I look down at the note clenched in my other hand beside the flashlight: "Go," Daniel said.

The knob turns smoothly and the door hardly makes a creak when I push it open. I hold my head over the doorway and the flashlight shows a short set of cement stairs leading down into darkness. There's no railing to hold so I go slow, ducking through the rectangle that's just shorter than me and following the flashlight's path. The cold seeps through my socks when I reach the bottom and I shiver in my Batman pajamas.

The cool air smells of dirt, must, and a hint of bleach as I follow the cement path surrounded by stained-brick walls that meet in an arch above my head. It's strangely quiet, the kind of quiet you never find in a residential facility full of "challenged" children. Scared, but determined, I keep walking the straight path. There's a small slither of light up ahead, poking through the darkness on the right side of the corridor, but where is it coming from? I shine the flashlight against the wall it seems to be peeking through.

As I approach it, I see a thin piece of wood pushed against the bricks. I drop the flashlight on the ground and move the wood away from the wall. Moonlight floods the passageway and I can't help but smile. The circular opening is barred by long vertical pipes, but I'm small enough to squeeze through. There's a large ring of the light of night ahead and I run to it, not stopping until the night twirls my cowlick and its air fills my nose with its bleachy scent.