

Fire and Water

SOMETHING WAS WRONG at the lighthouse. There were lights in the windows, but they were the wrong color, and they flickered.

Darren realized it first. "It's on fire!" he said, and we ran toward it. "Tyson set the place on fire!"

The front door was wide open, just as we had left it, and Tyson's aunt and uncle were still not home. As I peered in, I could see flames eating up the living room. There wasn't much time to think, or to do much of anything, but one thought did make its way to my brain. If Tyson was in there, and he died, it would be my fault, because we pushed him to do it. I knew that I couldn't live with that; I couldn't live with it for one single day!

I ran through the front door, as the rest of the club screamed for me to stop.

Inside, it didn't seem as bad as it had looked from the outside. The drapes were on fire, the furniture and part of the floor, too, but I could make my way around easily, if I

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held my breath. I ran down the hall that was just beginning to catch fire, but when I looked into Tyson's room I had to turn away—the fire was everywhere. I couldn't see a thing, and could feel the heat all around me! There was no way I could get near the room.

Fire moves faster than most people probably think it does. When I turned around, the hallway was blocked off by flames, so I turned and ran through a door, finding myself in the kitchen. It was amazing, but nothing in the kitchen was on fire yet. I closed the door behind me.

That's when I began to get scared. Really scared. It just came over me, nearly making me pass out. Smoke filled the room, and I could hear the rumble of the flames eating up the walls around me. There were no windows in the small kitchen, and only one other door. I ran to open it.

It was locked.

Turning the knob, I pushed on it again and again, but it wouldn't budge. I was trapped! I heard the television explode in the living room, and I realized that coming into this burning house was the biggest mistake I had ever made. That's when I did it.

I wet my pants.

That's right, I wet my pants, and I'm not ashamed of it either! I was on the verge of frying to death! No human being can stand that stress.

Anyway, I didn't realize it right away; I was too

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busy kicking at the door. Then for no particular reason, I turned the knob and pulled rather than pushed. The door opened.

How stupid! I thought to myself. How stupid it would be if I died because I was too much of an idiot to pull the door instead of push it!

I closed the door behind me and found myself in a round room, standing before an old wooden spiral staircase. I was inside the base of the lighthouse.

Behind me the roar of the flames got loud, and I knew that the kitchen was history; I had gotten out just in time. Ahead of me lay the spiral staircase, no windows or doors, and so up I went.

At the top of the stairs, I found myself inside a dirty glass booth, the light cage, I think it's called. In the center of the round booth was the old light that hadn't been used for dozens of years.

I saw him right away. Tyson sat between the light cage and the railing that ran around it, clutching something in his hands and rocking back and forth. He saw me right away, too. I stepped out of the light cage, and onto the ledge. He looked up at me. His eyes were red from tears; my eyes were red from smoke. He picked something up that lay next to him—a broken piece of brick—and he hurled it at me. It hit me in the shoulder. I tried not to feel it.

"Go away!" he said through his tears. "Just go away!" He

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threw something else—this time a shard of thick glass. I ducked and it went over the rail.

"I hate you!" he screamed. "Hate-you-hate-you-hate-you! I wish you were dead! I wish . . . I wish you were never born!"

I moved slowly in on him, and he leaned away, still clutching whatever it was he was clutching. "Tyson," I said, "the fire's almost here! We've got to figure out a way down!"

"No. I'm staying. You can jump for all I care."

"Tyson, I'm trying to help you!"

"Yeah, sure you are."

I held out my hand to him, and he turned away. "No!" he screamed, holding the thing he was holding far away from me. "No! You're not taking this, too!" He stood and ran around the ledge and I ran after him, going in circles until I finally caught him. He turned and threw it at me, hitting me in the forehead. I tried not to feel it.

"Take it!" he screamed. "Take it, I don't care. I don't care, I don't care . . ." He fell to his knees, crying, and rocking back and forth, and I looked at what he had been holding. It was the picture of him and his parents—the one thing he had saved from his room before setting it on fire. I knelt beside him. He was crying harder than ever now.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he mumbled. "Why? Why? Why? You never used to bother me like the other kids in school did. Now you're the worst. Well, I don't care," he

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said. "When the fire gets here, it won't matter. Then everyone'll be sorry."

"I already am sorry, Tyson." Tyson just sobbed and sobbed. He wasn't even fighting me off anymore. He just sobbed and rocked back and forth.

I felt funny about it, but I put my arm around him, like he was my kid or something. He didn't stop crying. "I'm your friend now, Tyson. I'll always be your friend. I've never been so wrong about anybody in my entire life, and I'll make it up to you."

"I didn't pull those pranks," he mumbled.

"I know. I was wrong." We sat there for a moment, and then I looked down at myself. "Look at me," I said. "I pissed in my pants!" He looked at my pants, then up at me, and for a second I thought I saw a smile there beneath the tears. I smiled at him. "Welcome to the club, right?" I said.

He shrugged.

"Sure. We can call it the Pee-Pee Club!"

He didn't say anything.

"C'mon," I said, "it'll be a real pisser!"

And at that, he laughed. It was short, but at least he laughed.

There was a light in the lighthouse, but it wasn't the kind of light you'd want to see—the lighthouse base was on fire. Whatever wood was down there had caught and was being eaten up. Smoke started to pour out of the light cage.

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"We'd better get out of here," I said, helping Tyson up.

"You go," he said. "I want to stay."

"Don't be dumb." I looked over the railing. "How far down is it?"

"Pretty far," said Tyson.

It seemed a long way down to the ground, but flames were already licking up inside the light cage. The flames from the house made it impossible to jump on any side, except for the side facing the sea, and so, as the flames began to reach out of the light cage, Tyson climbed over the railing. I didn't just yet. I ran around to the other side of the light cage, picked up Tyson's picture, smashed the glass, and took out the photo.

Tyson was still clinging to the ledge when I got back. I climbed over to the other side, and we sort of just stood there for a while, as the fire became fiercer. I thought of the time I was on a five-meter high board. I had stood there at the edge, looking over for a good ten minutes before I got the nerve to jump. We couldn't do that now.

"On the count of three," I said. "One . . . two . . . three!" We both let go without looking down, then hit the side and slid down the slope of the lighthouse. The stone was hot from the fire inside. We hit the bushes beside the lighthouse hard, but they were dense enough to break our fall. Still, we didn't stop, because the bushes sloped off quickly to the rocks above the ocean. We kept rolling, then suddenly I

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found myself rolling down rocks. The cliff wasn't too steep, but the rocks sure were jagged. Finally we stopped, just above the ocean. Tyson, who was falling backward, probably would have smashed his head if he hadn't landed on me first.

I looked up, and the lighthouse seemed amazingly far away. It was hard to believe we had tumbled all this way in such a short time.

It was high tide, the rocks were wet and slippery, the wind felt like a hurricane, and the waves kept hitting below, shooting water up through the crevices like a whale's blowhole. There was no way we could climb back up, but the storm offshore was churning up the sea so much, it seemed the ocean was no escape either. The waves were at least ten feet high now.

Another wave came in, and this one lifted us both up and smashed us down against the rocks again, sending foam flying in all directions.

"Ow!" I yelled. That one hurt! These were the types of waves that turned boulders into sand, and we would be dust if we sat there much longer.

Up above, there was an explosion.

"Watch out!" said Tyson. The entire light cage had shattered, sending shards of heavy glass down in our direction. "Duck!"

Big splinters of glass and burning wood landed all around. Up above, the frame of the house fell, and the burn-

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ing beams seemed about ready to come toppling down the rocks toward us. Our only chance was to get off the rocks, and make our way to the beach.

"But I can't swim!" said Tyson.

"I know," I said as I saw a wave—the darkest, meanest-looking one yet—looming in front of us, blocking out the rest of the ocean. "I can swim, though. Hold on to me!" I said. "I won't let you go."

Before we had time to figure out how we were going to work this, the wave was upon us. Tyson grabbed me around the waist, and we were underwater. The wave rolled us, dragging us across the rocks, then dragging us back, spinning us every which way around until I couldn't tell which way was up.

When my head broke the surface, we were off the rocks and out in the icy open sea, a hundred long yards from the beach. I kicked off my shoes, and with Tyson sputtering, coughing, and gagging, I began to swim toward shore, with him holding on to my belt for his life. At that moment I would have given anything in the world to have been Drew Landers, or even Randall; two strong swimmers who could handle this better than I could.

Tyson was panicking, nearly pulling me under each time a wave hit us, but somehow we kept our heads above water. My arms could barely stretch away from my body to pull the water, but my legs were strong from track. I kept kicking,

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counting each kick, and praying, which I never seemed to do enough of unless I thought I was going to die. All we needed was a riptide to drag us out into the sea, and we'd never be seen again. I began to wonder if there were any sharks around here. There were stories about people who got eaten by sharks nearby, and Ralphy Sherman says—well, to ~~with~~ with what Ralphy Sherman says.

A wave broke around us, carried us over the crest, and smashed us down on the shells—but that was all right, because it was land! When we came up, Tyson was still gagging. I grabbed his hand, got my balance, and limped with him to shore. The water was so cold that the second I stood, my legs cramped into knots. I could barely move, so as soon as we reached the beach, we collapsed on the wet sand.

"I've got to . . . I've got to teach you to swim!" I said to Tyson. "So the next time this happens . . ." I thought about that and began to laugh. I coughed, laughed, choked, and cried all at the same time.

On the other side of the rocks, we could hear sirens. The firemen had finally arrived, but there wasn't much to put out—the entire house had fallen over, tumbling down into the ocean. All that remained was the shell of the lighthouse, looking like some short, pudgy smokestack. Somewhere up there stood the rest of the Shadow Club, probably thinking we were both dead. What a surprise they were in for!

"Hey, Tyson," I said. He turned to me. "Here." I reached

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into my back zippered pocket and took out a folded photograph, handing it to him. "I figured you'd want this."

Tyson took it, rolled over, and looked at it, while I looked over his shoulder. His parents didn't look all that greasy. Neither did he, back then.

"It's the only picture I have of my parents," he said.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"They died when I was seven," he said, and then he added, "... in a fire."

He kept staring at that photo. It was wet and faded, but it was all he had.

As I lay there in the cold, waiting for my muscles to uncramp, a dumb thought came to mind. Now that I was soaking wet, I realized that no one would ever know that I had wet my pants. I never did tell anyone about it—not my parents, not Cheryl, not anyone. It was a secret between Tyson and me.