

At the School
By Danny Cove

Kevin Maurik was not confident when he followed Danny Listro and Jared Jareth into the school. But their town was going crazy, so what were they going to do, stay outside while the crap started raining from the sky? Of course not.

They'd been wandering around town when they first heard the screams in the distance. The screams were rare and short-lived, but unmistakable. So they'd hidden from sight, backing into shadowy back alleys watching as the cops drove by in a frenzy, lights blazing, horns wailing. "These cops aren't on patrol," Danny had said when they saw one of them shooting by at over sixty miles an hour. "They're heading somewhere, and *fast*."

"To the screams?" Jared asked, but Danny rapped him on the forehead with his knuckles in that "are you stupid?" way he always did. Kevin stayed quiet, pushing himself further back in the alley than the other two.

And then came the explosion. It happened about twenty minutes after they saw the cop drive by, after they'd moved down about three blocks in an attempt to get back to Danny's place. It was like a low rumble at first, and then there was what Kevin could only think of as *energy* that knocked all three of them off their feet, like they'd been hit by some great shock wave. The air around them was filled with dust, and Kevin had had to pull up the collar of his shirt and breathe through that. "What the hell?" Jared coughed. Danny didn't say anything – couldn't say anything – but he pointed in the direction of the hospital, which was less than a block away. Jared kept an arm over his mouth while Danny pulled a rag out of his pocket and held it up to keep from breathing in everything that was floating in the air. They turned a corner and stopped, frozen by what they saw.

They saw nothing.

To their left, there was an ambulance on its side, its exposed side crushed as if something the size of Godzilla had stepped on it. But beyond that was a white-and-gray mist where the hospital should have been. The three boys stared at the empty expanse for what felt like an eternity, unable to comprehend how a whole hospital could simply vanish. But as some of the dust cleared, they could see that the hospital hadn't vanished at all; it had collapsed. Piles of rubble lay sprawled out, disappearing into the forest, with whatever trees hadn't been crushed by the falling building leaning away as if the sheer force of the destruction had pushed them away.

The boys turned from there and headed toward the school, Danny in the lead. Kevin didn't know why Danny was leading them to the school, of all places, but he followed nonetheless. When they arrived, some of the backup lights were on, as if the backup generator had been accidentally flipped on, bathing many of the interior rooms in an eerie red glow. More than once as they moved along those hallways, Kevin felt like they were moving through Hell, having unknowingly died in the fall of the hospital.

In the cafeteria, they found a small group of other kids, scared and huddled together. Kevin picked out Miranda Tofield, who he'd secretly been crushing on since the seventh grade. She had long, dark hair and multiple piercings along her ears, but with green eyes that appeared black in the crimson light. The three boys joined the group and set about to hold up in the school until they knew it was safe to emerge, until they knew that the rest of the town was not destined to go the way of the hospital.

Kevin had been trying to get up the courage to talk to Miranda when Jared got back to the cafeteria. He'd left for about fifteen minutes with a kid named Luke, sent by Danny out on a scouting mission to see how things looked outside, but judging by their stark white faces, things did not look good. Kevin caught up as Jared and Luke were explaining what they'd seen.

"It was the road, man," Jared said. "It's like...like it was alive or something, like it was alive and moving. Right, Luke?"

"I don't know," Luke disaffirmed. "It's more like the road was...flowing, like it had liquefied somehow. It's like all the tar was molten and flowing like a river."

"Like cooled lava," Jared said. "Only every now and then, you'd see some of it slither around and shake, like it was alive. Somehow, I don't know how, but the road is alive, man!"

"Shut up!" Danny whispered harshly as he flicked Jared again on the forehead. Jared glowered back at him but said nothing.

"You've got to listen to us!" Luke said, his voice rising.

"No, I don't!" Danny said. "I sent you both to see if it's safe outside but you come in here with this bullshit story? A road that came alive. That's impossible." He turned back to the others, the kids who were huddled in the center of the cafeteria, all of them looking visibly frightened. "But to be on the safe side, let's close the grating. If nothing else, it'll give them a sense of being safe."

"That won't do any good if that thing gets in-" Jared began, but Danny flicked him on the forehead for a third time that night and he stopped talking, storming back toward the group. Without speaking, Kevin joined Luke in pulling out and latching the tall, sliding aluminum grate that separated the cafeteria from the rest of the school after hours. After securing the latch, they rejoined the group and Kevin continued to look for an opportunity to talk to Miranda Tofield.

That opportunity came an hour later. As Kevin sat in the semi-darkness, thinking about what was happening, he was startled by Miranda as she tapped him on the shoulder. She'd slid up along the other side of the table and climbed across to sit beside him. "Do you see Danny over there?" Kevin turned his gaze to Danny, who was sitting near the window and peering out, his gaze occasionally flicking back to the group, a grimace seeming to always be on his face. Kevin nodded. "What do you think is wrong with him?" Miranda asked.

Kevin breathed in deeply, not knowing where to get started. He couldn't very well tell all of Danny's secrets, or Danny would make his life hell. That was, in fact, why he helped to bully the weaker kids in school: so that Danny wouldn't set his sights on him. *Better to be at the right hand of the devil than in his path*, he'd once heard in a movie. "The school's his safe place," Kevin said, gauging his words. "His house...well, he doesn't have much of a home, so he made the school his home."

"But he always seems to hate it here."

"He hates it anywhere. But he hates the school the least, because at least here he can rule over some of the underclassmen."

"Is it like control issues or something?"

"Or something," Kevin said, but he would say no more on that. "What's going on in the town, it's hit him hard. I can tell that. But if it came to the school, if something happened to all of us here under *his* watch...well, I don't think he could come back from that."

A sound burst out from the walls, like a grinding or a wailing sound, and all of the kids jumped out of their seats. Danny stumbled over to the center of the room and listened carefully as the sound died off. "What was that?" one kid asked, his voice quivering.

“It sounds like the pipes,” Jared said, instinctively putting a hand to his forehead before Danny could flick him there. “I think something’s moving through the water pipes.”

“Like water?” another kid asked.

“Not water,” Luke commented. “Something thicker. You can tell by how slow it moved, and the way the pipes reacted to it. My dad’s a plumber,” he added before anyone else had a chance to question it.

“Should we follow it?” Kevin asked, trying to sound brave before Miranda.

“I think we should go the other way,” Luke answered him. “If that thing made it into the school, then I don’t want to be here when it comes pouring down the hallway.”

“Do you still think it’s some sort of living tar-monster?” Danny asked. “That’s freaking ridiculous.”

“Hey, I know what I saw!” Luke snapped back.

“You know what?” Danny exclaimed as he flicked open the latch on the cafeteria’s dividing grate. “Why don’t we just go and take a look, see this tar-monster for ourselves? How’s that sound, Luke?”

“No!” Luke said. “We need to get the hell out of here!”

“Jared, what do you think?” Danny asked, his dark gaze drilling into Jared, who had pressed himself against the wall, looking both scared and downtrodden.

“Whatever you say, Danny,” he said quietly, moving out into the beam of the nearest crimson lamp set in the ceiling. With a look that was part-grin and part-grimace, Danny pulled open the grating and slid out, either not seeing or choosing to ignore the dark gleam in Jared’s eyes, the look which always precipitated mutinies at sea.

Danny in front, everyone else following behind, the group moved left, following the hallway in the direction of the sound’s origin. Kevin and Miranda stayed near the back with a visibly shaken Luke, who looked likely to bolt at the slightest provocation. The hallway branched to the right and Kevin picked up his pace in order to keep up.

They moved through the massive gym, with its row upon row of folded benches and bleachers, all pressed against the wall like closed shelves. Still, Danny kept moving, almost as if the curiosity over the sound had trumped his own judgment, like a bloodhound following the trail of a wounded bear. Kevin began to share Luke’s tenseness, wanting to turn and run from that place, to take Miranda somewhere safe, somewhere away from that strange sound. But there was safety in numbers.

They arrived at the pool, which was lit by those same, crimson backup lights which made the pool itself look like it was filled with blood rather than the extremely over-chlorinated water which it usually held. “It can’t have come from beyond here, could it?” Danny asked, turning to the group. Kevin could see his eyes locked on Luke in that way they usually locked onto Larry Fishface, the poor kid that was such an easy target for their terrible trio. “Anyone see anything?”

Danny didn’t see what was behind him. He didn’t see it, but Kevin did, and Jared did, and everyone except for Danny did. It was like a great and terrible shadow rising up from beneath the waters, sending ripples out that forced the water up over the lip of the pool. Danny had just enough time to look down at his newly-soaked sneakers when something enormous and slimy-black wrapped itself twice around his torso, snaking around him like a python of pure shadow. Without a single sound, he was torn from his place and dragged beneath the waters, barely even making a splash.

The group erupted in screams and a panicked flurry of movement as more of those dark tendrils snaked out from the pool, some of them almost looking like shadows but others taking

more solid and terrifying shape, like great oily serpents coiling and uncoiling as they rose from the watery depths of the chlorinated waters. Two more people were dragged under, their screams trailing off even underwater. One boy tried running the breadth of the pool, but what appeared to be a tentacle – complete with round protrusions on its underside – knocked him in the side, sending him flying ten feet into one of the simple aluminum benches where swimmers were to wait before entering the water. He tried to get up, saw the tentacle, then slid down beneath the bench, but the tentacle grappled with the entire frame and dragged it – kid and all – into the watery grave.

One girl was being pulled by a strikingly small tendril, itself barely the width of her own leg. Jared grabbed her hand and held it for only a second before she slid away. He ran after her, sliding, but stopped at the edge of the pool, watching as some enormous mass began to rise from its depths, something far too large to have possibly been hiding in such shallow waters. Jared froze as he found himself staring into an enormous black eye, unblinking, dripping with water and mucus. Jared turned to move backward but a sweeping tentacle knocked both of his ankles from behind and he tumbled off-kilter, smacking his head on the wet tile with a soft thud. His eyes whipped closed and blood began to pool around him as his body was dragged almost tenderly by a smaller limb down into the depths of those whirling black waters.

A group of them ran together back the way they'd come, leaping another sweeping tentacle as they made their escape back to the gym. There were only five of them left: Kevin, Miranda, Luke and two others, those who had been closest to the door. Their feet squeaked through the gymnasium, but no one took the time to look back and see if they were still being pursued.

They turned down a different hallway from the cafeteria, now thinking as one that they needed to get out of the school, to get away from that demented place of sea monsters and God knew what else. But as they neared the front door, they heard the sound of it opening on its own and saw a form, darkened by the crimson lights which were flickering. A single face flashed in the window of the front door, lit by some sort of exterior light, possibly the moon, for all Kevin knew. That face – which he momentarily thought he recognized as Jody McDormand – was enough to startle the group such that they turned and went in another direction, this time running blindly through the darkness until they found a room with a strong, unlocked door. They tumbled in as one and pressed the door shut behind them, pushing as many bodies against it as possible, hoping they'd have enough force to keep out whatever may be on their tails.

After a few moments in which they tried to catch their breaths, Kevin stumbled to his feet and tried the light switch. The lights flicked on without hesitation, though beneath the door they could still see that eerie crimson glow of the hallway's backup lights. The light inside the room, however, was bright and fluorescent, illuminating what was revealed to be the shop class. Various tools lay on benches and shelves nearby, with a group of desks shoved against the wall, about ten feet from an engine block that was propped up on something Kevin couldn't make out beneath the bulk of the engine itself. He'd never been in here before, never seen the solid stone walls which now gave him comfort against the terrifying memories of the creature from the pool, the creature which had dragged so many of their friends down into the depths which should have been shallow.

Suddenly, there was a strange sensation in the air, like an electrical current passing through it, causing Kevin's hair to rise up ever-so-slightly, but this feeling was drowned out in the screams of two of the survivors. Kevin and Luke both spun around to see two bodies shaking

violently for a second before dropping to the floor, their limbs twitching as a stinking, burning steam issued from their clothes. They lay in two crumpled piles at the feet of Miranda, who stood holding two severed power cords, each slightly less thick than Kevin's wrist. The cords were sparking in her hands, but she was protected by their rubber coating. With a dark look on her face, Miranda dropped the cords, which snapped by the bodies of her two classmates, and stepped between them in order to get closer to Kevin and Luke.

"Miranda!" was all Luke could get out, but he stopped as her hands whipped rapidly to the handheld saber saw sitting on the shelf, its heavy battery pack resting squarely on her slender right wrist. Without a second of hesitation, she sped toward him and Kevin could only wince in horror as the ear-shattering whine of the blade was muffled by its descent into Luke's chest. Blood poured over Miranda's arms, her hands turning the same color as the emergency lights in the hallway. Luke's arms flailed and tried to push her away, but his legs gave out and he crashed to the floor, coughing in his own blood as the saber saw stayed in Miranda's hands. In what felt like a terrifyingly short few seconds, Luke had fallen silent like the others, whose bodies were still twitching noticeably.

Kevin backed up quickly, nearly tripping on his own feet as he did so. He felt the desks slide and shuffle as he shoved them out of his way, then felt a hard thud as he backed into the engine block. He spun around it but then found himself cornered, Miranda still approaching with the whirring blade. "Miranda, please, don't do this!" Kevin begged.

As if accepting his request, Miranda actually did stop, and the whirring blade came to a stop as her finger rose from its power button. She smiled in a way that sent shivers down Kevin's sweaty spine, then sat the saw gently on a desk just behind her. "Please, just, let me go," he continued to beg, his mind unable to understand but unwilling to focus on the reason for Miranda's sudden homicidal outburst. But as he stared, he saw her skin turning dark, shifting into brown, like his own skin, but then continuing to get darker, until her arms began to take a more pitchy sheen, like living tubes of oil. "What are...?" he tried, but the words were escaping him. Then, finally, an idea began to form in his mind, a horrible, terrible, soul-shattering idea. "Are we dead?"

She said nothing, only started moving toward him again, that dark gleam in her eyes as she grew momentarily taller, looking like one of the taller teachers, maybe Mr. Hayerdahl or Miss Jenson. Miranda's face began to morph and transform along with the rest of her body, until all Kevin could see was what could be loosely described as a living shadow with rivers of oil pulsing like blood throughout it. "Am I in Hell?"

"No..." Miranda's soft voice cooed in the darkness, which grew steadily closer. "But you're going to help me, Kevin. You're going to see if there's a Heaven."

Before Kevin had a chance to question this bizarre suggestion, the flood of darkness rushed toward him and enveloped him like a wave in the ocean. Blackness stretched across the wall like a spiderweb, with bands of crimson at the core, and then the darkness receded, floated back to the door and drifted beneath it. But Kevin, as well as the other bodies which had lain in that haunted room, were nowhere to be found.