

Chapter A

Gruesome.

That was the first word we used when the drunk driver took out a power pole and two other cars outside our school that day. The whole class went rushing to the road to check out the scene before Mrs Dawber really knew what was happening. The drunk driver was killed instantly. The pole has squashed his head into an unrecognisable pulp. There are some things that you can't un-see and this was one of them. Some of the kids were leaning towards the vehicle trying to get a look. Not me.

The other two drivers came off a bit better, although we learned later that a passenger in one of the cars needed to have her spleen removed. Whatever a spleen was. After the teacher recovered her wits and the emergency services turned up to whisk away the injured, she ushered us back to class.

"That was gruesome," said Adam

"Nah, revolting is the word," Janet said.

"Horrendous," said Pike.

Everyone in the class had a word for what we'd seen. Grotesque. Horrid. Hideous. Repulsive. Macabre. As usual my best buddy Waver was thinking along slightly different lines. "That was truly gnarly, man."

"OK Class," barked Mrs Dawber, "Sorry to interrupt your rendition of the dictionary, but we need to get back to work. I must say I'm impressed with your use of the English language. Your choice of words is interesting. Even yours Mr Wave," she pursed her lips at him, and then looked out the window. "Actually we could use this to our advantage," she mumbled. "I'd like to explore definitions more thoroughly. What other words could we use to describe what we experienced today?"

I couldn't believe old Doorbell was turning this into a lesson! Lame-o. But a couple of the kids were into it.

"We could look up the dictionary," said Smithy.

"And a thesaurus," offered Amelia. I watched her lips closely as she spoke the words and for some reason I could feel my face heating up. Must focus on class, I thought.

Ghastly, repugnant, horrific, shocking, frightful, dreadful and grim were words all the class agreed on. As well as Waver, a couple of other students had a different take on things.

"Interesting"

"Exciting"

"Astonishing"

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“Amazing”

“Actually,” said Amanda, more softly than her usual ear-splitting volume, “I thought it was just plain sad.”

We all took a moment to remember that it was an actual person we saw squashed in that car.

“What about you Shane,” asked Doorbell, “do you have a word?”

“Lame,” I grumbled under my breath.

“Pardon? What was that? “

“Nothing, Miss,”

“So what’s your word for today’s events,” she asked, her beady eyes on me.

“I...well. I don’t have a word that hasn’t already been said.”

“Someone please pass Mr English a dictionary!”

I opened it to the first page.

A

Abandon. Yeah I could sure relate to that, but that wasn’t appropriate for today’s drama.

Accusation. There’d been plenty of that going round. But not the word I needed.

Affected. I was, but not by the crash today.

Afraid. Oh yeah.

Alienation. I sure felt that, alright.

Anchor. I’d lost mine.

Anxious. Yeah, I felt this all right.

“Well. It was definitely atrocious, but I can’t believe that a drunk driver hurt other people. So my word is angry.”

And that pretty much summed up my life.

Chapter B

I went straight home when the 3.20 bell rang. As expected, no-one was home, but I wasn't used to it yet, and instead of a warm welcoming home, the house had an abandoned feel. I'd been the first one home plenty of times before, when the house had that closed up feel, but this was different, emptier somehow. I made myself a sandwich – my favourite peanut butter and banana – and sat down at the dining room table to do my homework. Courtney wasn't home yet, so I had plenty of uninterrupted time alone to concentrate on my worse subject; maths.

Our old Victorian villa had been infested with cockroaches about a week earlier but that afternoon they were quiet. It was one of the reasons Mum left. Actually I'm not one hundred per cent sure why she left, but she certainly mentioned it as she was walking out of the door the day before. I think her exact words were "And this place is a hole, Neil. It's a hole. I can't stay here anymore."

I only saw one or two scurry away when I'd arrived home and no movement since. I thought I'd help Dad out so I checked out pest control in the Yellow Pages and found a guy called The Roachinator. I didn't know if he was any good but he sounded cool. I left the page open on the kitchen table for Dad to see. Hopefully he'll do something about the disgusting things. I'm a guy and don't mind 'gross' with the rest of them, but I *hate* cockroaches.

Dad arrived the same time as Courtney, close to dinner time. They quietly walked in together, not speaking to each other, or to me. He somehow looked older today than he had looked yesterday. Dad's eyes glanced over me but didn't seem to see me. His skin was sallow with dark, brown shadows under his eyes. I noticed small clumps of facial hair he must have missed when he'd shaved that morning.

Courtney went straight to her room without a word.

"What's for dinner, Dad?"

He looked at me as if seeing for the first time. "What?"

'Dinner. What's for dinner, I'm hungry.'

"Oh, I hadn't thought about dinner. Usually Mum..." His voice drifted off into a mumble.

"I'll go and get pizza," he said and turned around and walked out the door, still carrying the briefcase he's walked in with minutes before.

I stomped off to my room, passing Courtney's closed door and slammed my door behind me. I too didn't want to see to anyone else.

Talk about useless. Mum walks out on us and Dad was useless. Who was going to look after us now? I checked my phone to see if Mum had called or texted, but there was nothing from her, just a pxt from Waver showing his feet.

What the...

Why would Waver want to send me a picture of his feet? Then another text message arrived:

Oops, had phon in pocket, sent by mstke. Hav u heard from Ben? He seemd bummed about sumthink. I think he bein bullied. Bumma

No I havnt herd from him.
Hey, u going to the school dance-a-thon?

Dunno. Mayb. If I can find sum1 2 take. U?

LOL. Who'd go wif u!

Thanx 4 the vote of confidence man!

Ha ha, just kidding.
Catch ua.

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I wondered what was up with Ben. He'd seemed a bit withdrawn recently, and he hadn't showed up for hockey practice for the last few weeks or wanted to meet up at the skate park like usual. It was typical of Waver to see that Ben was having some kind of trouble, but that he hadn't noticed my world was falling apart. Of course I hadn't told him or Ben, so how would they know? I made a mental note to text Ben later to see what was up.

I heard Dad come back and as I headed downstairs, I knocked on Courtney's door to tell her dinner was ready. She called out "Piss off." Nice. I told her that dinner was ready and left her to it. If she wanted to starve, that's was her choice.

Dad and I ate our pizza in silence, in front of the TV. The news was all doom and gloom as usual, but I wasn't sure how much Dad was taking in. He hadn't asked noticed that Courtney wasn't there or asked where she was.

I was lost in my own thoughts so when he spoke suddenly, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Have you heard from your Mum?"

Instantly I could feel tears prickling behind my eyes and fought them back.

"No."

Why hadn't she called?

"Well then," was all he said.

I went back to my bedroom after dinner and played some music. After a while I texted Ben.

Nuffink

What's up Dude?

Waver said u wer bummed
about sumthink..

Nah, just school. Its shit.

Yeah, true dat.

Shane, wat wud u do if ther woz som1 U liked but they
didn't no u existed? Wud u say something 2 them?

Who u like? Is she in ur class? Do I know her?
Waver said ur being bullied. Dat true?

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There was no answer for a while and I thought maybe he'd gone to sleep.

Never mind. C u 2morrow

I didn't think anything more of it, but in hindsight I should have been worried. I should have asked more questions.



The next day at school, Old Doorbell must have been doing some thinking overnight.

“Yesterday’s accident was very traumatic, so if anyone wants to talk to me about it, or talk to someone in private let me know. I liked what we did with the words and the dictionary, so we’re going to be creating our own dictionaries.”

She beamed at us, as if this was the greatest idea she’d ever had. There was a collective groan from the class.

“This is a fantastic opportunity to get to grips with some of the great words and meanings that the English language has to offer and to also help express yourselves in ways that you may not have explored before. Over the next few weeks, I’d like you to start creating your own dictionary. One with words that have meaning for you.”

Several hands were waving in the air. “Miss, do you mean we have to write a whole dictionary?”

Someone call out, “It’s like a hundred pages!”

With her customary pursing of the lips, Old Doorbell said “You don’t need to start at the beginning. You can start anywhere in the alphabet. Write down words that have meaning to you, such as in yesterday’s awful event. I was very *disturbed* by what happened yesterday, so I might start with D. I’ll think of all the words that mean anything to me that start with D.”

“Like what, Miss?” asked Smithy.

“Like, Mr Smith, Dahlias are my favourite flowers. And I have a Degree from university. And Mr Smith, I can be very determined when I want to be. I’d like you to choose words

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with meaning to you and write what it means and why you picked that word. You have two weeks to complete the assignment and we'll start on it now."

This was another lame exercise Old Doorbell had come up with. I wondered why she continued to force us to do this crap. I wrote up the scope of the assignment, as we were instructed, and thought about the words I'd looked at yesterday. I might as well start at the beginning. I figured my A's were pretty much done, so I wrote it out and headed up a page for B.

B

Bad. I felt pretty bad. After the day we had on Monday. And Sunday.

Baffled. I couldn't understand how someone who was supposed to love you could leave.

Banana. My favourite sandwich filling, along with peanut butter.

Believe. I wasn't sure I believed my Mum when she said she loved us.

Break. What mum was having.

Broken. My family.

Blabbermouth. Should I say something to my friends?

Besties. Ben and Waver were my besties. (abbreviation for best friend)

Bothering. There was something bothering one of my best buddies

Yeah, I should have listened to that inner voice, that instinct. Later on I would regret that. Big time.