

My brother and I left reality together.
Only one of us came back...

When

we got

LOST

→ in ←

DREAMLAND

ROSS WELFORD

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BEFORE IT ALL STARTED

I've got to tell you about a bad dream. Only . . . it's real as well.

That's okay – it didn't make sense to me, either, at first.

When I was very little, I had this dream about a crocodile coming down the railway track where we lived, and chasing me round the back garden. (This was where we lived before Dad left. Seb was still a baby.)

I'd wake up and shout for Mam and she'd come into my room and say, 'Shush, Malky, shush. You'll wake Sebbie. It's just a bad dream,' and she'd sit on the side of the bed and stroke my hair and sing the song that went, '*Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be . . .*'

But the crocodile kept coming back.

Then Mam had the idea of buying me a stuffed toy crocodile and giving it a funny name and we chose Cuthbert. Nothing called Cuthbert could be scary, she said.

So one night (I must have been about six) the crocodile was there, back in our old garden, chasing me like before.

I stopped and pointed to it and said its name: ‘Cuthbert!’

In seconds, the beast in front of me turned into my toy. I watched – there in the garden in my Star Wars pyjamas – mesmerised, as the horny, scaly, knobbled skin became the soft green fur of a cuddly toy; the yellow razor teeth transformed to little white triangles of felt. Everything about him shrank till he was a furry toy.

All in my dream.

When I woke up the next morning, Mam says, my arm was slung round toy Cuthbert. The nightmares went away shortly after that.

This was my first experience of controlling a dream, and I kind of forgot all about it. Then the Dreaminator came along, and Cuthbert came back and, well . . .

The next time I saw Cuthbert – the real Cuthbert, not the toy one – was several years later when I was with Seb, and the crocodile flopped out of the boot of a car belonging to one of the most evil men ever to have lived.

I should have quit then. But I didn’t.

I was somewhere bigger, more mysterious, and scarier than anywhere on earth you could possibly dream of. I guess you’d call it Dreamland – and that’s where I lost Seb._____

CHAPTER 1

This is my dream, I've been here before, and I'm furious and scared.

Furious because this is not meant to be happening, and scared because it *is*. It's Sebastian's fault, of course. *Why does he keep doing this?*

Even I could tell that things were getting better. Seb and I hadn't fought in weeks. Mam was happy. I had made friends at school. (Well, *a* friend, sort of, but still . . . You'll meet her.) Dad had called for the first time in ages.

I stand in the mouth of the cave, wondering what to do. A massive seagull circles high above me in the cold blue sky. In the distance, down by the shore, the same pair of woolly mammoths as before munch lazily on the same oversized birthday cake.

I tut and think: *Why does Seb have to ruin everything?*

I could just wake up. In fact, that's exactly what I'm going—

'Oi, Dog-breath!'

I turn round to see my brother standing behind me,

in the cool shade of the cave, wearing his green goalkeeper's top.

'What's going on?' I snap at him. 'I turned the Dreaminators off.'

'I know. Why did you *do* that?' he whines. 'I turned them on again cos I couldn't fall asleep. My sleep rhythms are out of sync with yours.'

My thleep rhythmth are out of thync with yourth. I know it's tricky to speak properly when you're missing three front baby teeth, but he doesn't even try. Anyway, I'm not going to write it out like that every time he says something, so you'll just have to imagine that he speaks like a dog's squeaky toy.

'Seb, man,' I say, trying not to shout straight away, 'it isn't safe. There's something not right and I think we should . . .'

'Not right with what?'

'Not right with the Dreaminators. With . . . with everything . . .'

'Come on, Malky. You *said* we could. You *promised!*'

I didn't, actually, but he's getting more whiny. I hate it when he gets whiny.

'Seb . . . I'm telling you, something is wrong.'

He's not listening. 'Where are the others?' he asks. I shake my head. I am still thinking about stopping the whole thing right there. Seb starts sniffing. 'They've been here. Not long gone, in fact.' He points to a fire smoking

in a pit. The sharp wind outside the cave rattles the bunches of seaweed, hanging in long strings like little grey-green flags, that are drying by the cave mouth.

‘They have gone to steal food,’ I say, a bit grumpily. ‘You know how it goes.’

One last dream together? A short one. No more after that.

‘What, without us?’ says Seb. ‘That’s not fair. Come on, Malk. We’ll just wake up if we need to.’

From somewhere – my conscious mind, wherever that is right now? – drifts a warning. How did it go? *Inside your mind is bigger than the outside, Malky . . .*

‘Malky!’ shouts Seb. ‘Come *ooooon!*’

I give in. He’s right on one thing: we can wake up and come out of the dream whenever we want. That bit I can still control, at least. And the minute the crocodile appears we’re out of here.

I have never made a bigger mistake.

‘All right,’ I say, quickly, before I can change my mind. ‘We can catch them up. They won’t have got further than the lake. And promise me: when I say we quit, we quit, okay?’

‘Promise,’ says Seb. But I’m not sure he’s really listening.

CHAPTER 2

We set off at a trot, each of us clutching a spear with a tip of sharp flint, and a thick wooden club with a fist-sized rock securely tied on one end with strips of leather.

We get to the end of the beach – exactly like the real beach where we live in Tynemouth (apart from the mammoths, obviously) – and run up the hill until we’re staring out over the huge plain where, in maybe ten thousand years’ time, there will be a wide road, and a pub playing live music, and a housing estate of low-rise flats. Now there isn’t any of that. There isn’t *anything* made by humans – apart from an old-fashioned airship that’s floating past in the sky above, shaped like a giant goldfish. Don’t ask me what it’s doing there. Dreams are weird like that and, by now, I’m kind of used to it.

There is no sign of our friends, though.

I say, ‘Super-sprint. Dream-style. You up for it?’

Seb grins gappily, and in an instant we are sprinting across the windy plain like a pair of Olympic runners battling for the finish line. Side by side, weapons in hand, I’m edging ahead of Seb, and then he pulls level as the

Gravy Lake comes into view in the far distance. Then he's ahead of me. He remains ahead as we descend the side of the shallow canyon where there is a green river of minty custard (this is a dream, remember?) and we hop across the exposed rocks and up the other side.

I let him get a good lead so that he will think he is winning. Then it'll be an easy matter to lengthen my stride, judging it finely so that I can overtake him and win at the last minute, but not humiliate him so that he won't want to race again.

And so, as the Gravy Lake gets closer, and I can see the shapes of our companions gathering on its shore, I begin to exert myself a little more. I deliberately make my strides stronger and longer . . . but still Seb is ahead of me. I drop my weapons and pump my arms more, thrusting my chin out, and run harder. And harder.

It's happening again. My dream is not doing what I tell it to do.

What's wrong? I'm not gaining on Seb at all.

I have no idea exactly how fast we are running, but the ground is whooshing past under my feet at a terrifying rate and, however fast I go, Seb is managing to keep ahead of me.

It is not meant to happen like this. I don't understand it.

Kobi and the others are in full view now, and I can't stop in time. I'm going so fast that I run right past them

and into the shallows of the freezing-cold lake where the watery school gravy finally stops me and I fall forward, sinking under the surface before rising, gasping for air. The others point at me and laugh, while Seb bounces on his feet, arms raised in victory.

The cold of the gravy has shocked me.

Being beaten by Seb has shocked me more.

I'm still standing in the shallows of the brown lake, and I look round at the group: there's little Erin, old Farook and, of course, Kobi the Cave Boy who looks like he does in Seb's book, which is cartoonish. He's basically a walking, talking drawing. He is wearing a fur thing that only covers one shoulder and he has a club-and-rock weapon like the one I just ditched. Looking at his fur makes me feel even colder because I'm just wearing my soaking pyjamas. I close my eyes and say, 'Change pyjamas to fur,' and wait.

Nothing happens. I try again, but I'm already losing confidence.

Seb hasn't seen any of this: he's a few metres away, talking to the others. I call over to him and he saunters back, all cocky after beating me in a running race.

'What's up, loser?' he says. 'You not cold?'

'Seb,' I say, 'it's going wrong again.'

'What do you mean, "again"? ' says Seb.

'I've told you: the dream doesn't always do as it's told, and it's happening much quicker now. Look!' I point

upwards. 'Turn green!' The sky does not turn green. I don't want to scare him, though. Instead, I say, 'Shall we wake up now?' It's really the only safe option.

He wrinkles his nose and pouts. 'I don't want to. What's wrong with you? You said it yourself, Malky. We haven't got much time. I want to get to the bit when I ride the mammuf, at least!'

He's in such a good mood, and he's probably right. Even if I can't direct things perfectly, we'll both come out of the dream cycle, anyway, waking up normally in our beds at home, in about twenty minutes. I'll soon dry out.

Relax, Malky! It'll be perfectly safe. Just like a normal dream where weird stuff happens.

I try to convince myself, I really do. I tell myself, *Let it be . . .*

'Come on, Malky,' he says. 'We're on a food raid, remember? Just like in the book!'

'Yeah, yeah,' I sigh. 'You win.'

I move forward on to the lip of the low cliff, where the lake tumbles over the rock in a massive waterfall, like the drawing in the book. I release the big breath that I took and scent the air, turning my head completely in line with the horizon.

The smell is coming from where the sun is just beginning to set, painting the Gravy Lake brownish-pink. Someone is roasting meat. Mammoth? I turn back to the

others and nod. 'Meat,' I say. Kobi's cartoon lips part in a wide grin and he sticks out his tongue with pleasure. He has no fear about what might come next. He never does. Beside him, Erin stands up and holds her hand out to old Farook who waves it away and gets to her feet with a small grunt.

(Seb made up most of the names, by the way. Just thought I'd say that. Erin is a kid in his class.)

Through the trees, there's a huge rock and, a little further, the faint glow of a fire.

Stealing meat from another tribe is a huge risk. In the book, it's all fine and happy-endy: the tribe gives us meat because we're hungry, then Kobi gets to ride on a mammoth. We've never actually got that far in the dream, which is probably why Seb doesn't want to leave. He really wants to ride that mammoth, and I can't say I blame him.

I crouch behind the rock and pick up a lump of dirt and sniff it, recoiling at the foul smell of dog poo. 'Dogs,' I whisper, wiping it off my fingers. Even in the dark, I see a flash of fear pass over Erin's face. We all know about the dogs. The other tribe travels with them. They can talk to them, give them names and commands, just like we do in real life. The dogs attack when told to. They are terrifying, even in a dream.

Then from behind me I hear a sound: *r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r*. I swallow and spin round: there it is. An old

black-and-ginger hound with a grey muzzle. Its head is held low, ready to pounce; its eyes flash amber in the low sun. It lifts up one misshapen front paw, twisted from some old injury, and growls again.

R-r-r-r-r-r-r-r. There is another one now, and another. We turn . . . but they're behind us too. The five of us – me, Seb, Kobi, Erin and Farook – are blocked from retreating.

____Trapped._____