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Opening extract from

The Tornado Chasers

Written by

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This notepaper is kindly provided for the inmates of
THE COUNTY DETENTION CENTRE
Use one sheet per week
No scribbling

Dear Warden,

If you're reading this letter then it means I've finally escaped.

It also means you've found the secret place behind the loose tile above the sink, which means you'll have also found the mouse traps I put there before I left. ~~Sorry about~~ Actually I'm not sorry about that.

When I first came to the County Detention Centre, they said I had to tell the truth about what happened - when it all began, who did what, why we did it, why

it ended the way it did. 'Write it down,' they said. 'Make a poem about it all. Turn it into a story if you have to. But one way or another, you have to tell us.'

And so I did. I sat down, and I wrote a story - about everything that happened, from the beginning to the end, as best as I could tell it. The only way I could tell it. And here it is - every last word.

Which brings me to the question I know you're desperate to ask: if I've run away, then where have I run away to?

Well, you're just going to have to read my story, aren't you?

~~LOVE~~ YOURS SINCERELY,

INMATE 409

1

How It Began

MY NAME IS OWEN UNDERWOOD,
I AM 11 YEARS OLD TODAY,
AND THIS IS THE WORST BIRTHDAY
OF MY LIFE.

The last sentence I wrote in my diary, before it all happened.

To be fair it was the *only* sentence I wrote in my diary. The other pages I just left blank, and they stayed that way right up until the police searched my room weeks later and stamped the word 'EVIDENCE' on the front in red ink. I didn't have time to write down anything else, of course, because of everything that happened that night.

I was lying under my bed, which was wrapped with chicken wire and surrounded by several dozen

sandbags. This was in case the tornado ripped the roof off the house, or threw a boulder through the wall, or a ravenous bear broke the shutters and tried to climb through the window – which is why my parents had also given me a can of bear repellent. I hadn't used it yet, which was a relief because it had a label on the side that said the spray made you go blind if you inhaled it.

You might be wondering why I had a can of bear repellent, or why my bed was wrapped in chicken wire and sandbags. Maybe you don't live in a village like Barrow. Consider yourself lucky. When my parents told me just a few weeks before that we were moving to Barrow because of the tornado warning, I was pretty confused. No one in Skirting had ever seemed bothered about the storms. There hadn't been one in the valleys for over ten years. If we moved, I'd have to leave all my friends behind, and my school, right before the summer holidays. Mum and Dad said they had no choice – Barrow was the only safe place left to live in the valleys. And that made me even *more* confused.

What was there to be afraid of in the valleys?

And that was when they told me about the bear attacks.

'*OWEN!*'

The shout came from behind my bedroom door. I

startled, and smacked my head on the underside of the bed. Luckily I was wearing my crash helmet.

(I probably should have mentioned this earlier.)

I suffer from something called startling. Every time something happens that I don't expect – like a loud noise or a sudden movement – I lose control of my body for a bit. I've had it all my life. It's why I have to wear a helmet all the time. Luckily people are very understanding about it. At least, they were before I moved to Barrow.

I clambered out from under the bed, shaking the twitch out of my neck.

'Y-yes, Dad?'

'Your dinner's ready,' came his voice from the other side of the door.

I glanced around my bedroom. There wasn't much to look at. No toys, books, posters – nothing. All that was left was the bed, a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and the closed wooden shutters over the windows. Even my bedroom door handle was padded with foam. I walked over to the door and gave it a wiggle. It didn't move. Which wasn't surprising, given that my parents had just locked me inside.

(I probably should have mentioned *that* earlier, too.)

'Everything OK in there, darling?' came another

voice from behind the door. 'Having a nice birthday?'

'Yes, Mum,' I lied. 'It's wonderful.'

'Well, we've got a treat for you!' said Dad excitedly. 'Are you wearing your helmet?'

I gave it a loud knock with my fist. 'Yes, Dad.'

'Good boy,' said Mum. 'Now, stand back! It's very hot.'

I took several steps back.

'Here we go!' said Dad.

A ham and pineapple pizza slowly emerged from under the crack of the doorway. The ham had been arranged into a number '11'. It was quickly followed by a pair of yellow rubber gloves.

'Put the gloves on before you touch it,' said Dad sternly. 'In case of burns. Obviously we can't give you a knife or a fork because you might accidentally cut your fingers off and die.'

'And don't forget his cake!' added Mum.

'Oh yes,' said Dad. 'I almost forgot.'

A single pop-tart slid out from under the door and came to a stop by my feet.

'Happy 11th Birthday Owen!' said my parents in unison.

I sighed. Time for another lie.

'Wow. Thanks, Mum and Dad,' I said. 'What a treat.'

'Well, it *is* a special day,' said Dad. 'Anything else you need, Owen?'

I swallowed. Time for the truth – finally.

'Er . . . there is, actually,' I said. 'Dad, Mum – can I ask a favour?'

'Of course you can!' said Dad.

'You can ask us anything,' said Mum.

'Good,' I said, 'Well, I was wondering if maybe you could maybe, you know . . . let me out of my room for a bit?'

There was a stony silence on the other side of the door.

'You know we can't do that, Owen,' said Dad. 'It's far too dangerous. There's a raging tornado outside Barrow as we speak.'

'Besides, darling, don't forget about all those *bears* outside,' Mum added. 'Just because there's a tornado it doesn't mean they stop hunting the valleys for food. They could be outside your window right now.'

I glanced at the shutters behind me. They creaked menacingly in the wind. I gulped.

'I . . . I suppose,' I said.

'Glad you agree.' Mum sighed with relief. 'Anything *else* we can get our little birthday boy?'

I looked down at the pizza and the pop-tart. 'Maybe a drink?'

'Of course!' said Dad.

A plate of water slid out from under the doorway.

'Thanks,' I said dejectedly.

'Eat it quickly, darling!' said Mum. 'Remember the rules of the curfew – lights off at 6 p.m.'

My heart sank the moment she said it.

Six o'clock already! But then that meant . . .

'Ten minutes!' said Mum. 'And then straight to bed. Night, sweetie!'

I listened to their footsteps fade down the corridor in despair. This really was the worst birthday of my life. Not only was I locked inside my bedroom, with no friends or presents, but I only had ten minutes left until six o'clock.

The plan was going to go ahead without me.

I stared forlornly at my birthday dinner on the floor. Two miserable plates and a pop-tart. I didn't even have enough hands to carry them to my bed at the same time. I could have held the pop-tart in my mouth, of course – but knowing Mum and Dad, they'd tell me that I shouldn't, in case I suddenly startled and I choked on it and died . . .

A rebellious grin spread across my face.

Go on, Owen. They'll never know.

I pressed my ear to the door to make sure Mum and

Dad were nowhere near. Then I carefully placed the pop-tart between my teeth, picked up the plates, and swaggered to the bed with all three together.

'The perfect crime,' I mumbled.

Tap tap.

I startled.

You know what that means by now. First, my whole body seized up. My teeth clenched shut, and I bit straight through the pop-tart. One hand threw the plateful of water all over my face, and the other flung the pizza across the other side of the room where it stuck to the wall with a meaty *splat*.

'Who's there?' I cried, swinging round.

No one answered. My room was, of course, empty. It wasn't as if there were many places where someone could hide, either. I looked down at the remains of my birthday pop-tart, which had shattered into flavourless crumbs on the floor.

'Great,' I muttered. 'Well, that's just . . .'

Tap tap.

I startled again, ever so slightly. This time I knew exactly where the sound was coming from. My eyes flew to the closed wooden shutters.

There was something outside the window.

'H-hello?' I said nervously.

There was no response. I stood, frozen to the spot, water dripping off my hair. All I could hear were the storm reports on the radio downstairs and the rush of the wind on the shutters and the quickening *tap*, *tap*, *tap* of my heart. Behind me the pizza slowly slid down the wall, leaving the number '11' perfectly spelled out in ham on the wallpaper.

I gulped. 'Mum? Dad . . . ?'

And then all of a sudden it came again, louder, harder, the shutters trembling on their hinges with each strike.

THUMP. THUMP.

There was no doubt about it. It was a bear attack. Within seconds I was back behind the sandbags around my bed, wielding the can of bear repellent towards the shutters with trembling hands.

'D-don't come any closer!' I cried. 'This is highly flammable, and should never be used in an unventilated room—'

I was cut off by a loud groan from the other side of the shutters.

'Owen, you pillock,' said a voice. 'It's the *secret knock*. Remember?'

I recognised the voice immediately. It almost made me startle again.

'*You?*' I said.

'It's the whole point of the secret knock,' the voice continued angrily. 'I knock twice so you know it's me, and then you let me in. Christ! I've only explained it to you about a *thousand* times.' There was a loud sigh. 'Look – just let me in.'

I fumbled.

'I . . . I can't,' I said. 'The shutters are locked from the outside. My parents decided to . . .'

'Oh, forget it!' the voice muttered furiously. 'I'll just do it myself.'

A plastic ruler slid between the shutters and wiggled up, lifting the clasp that held the two panels together. They flew open, and at once the room was swept with a bracing wind that sent leaves swirling in great gusts across the floor.

Standing on my windowsill, a ruler in one hand and a samurai sword in the other, was Callum Brenner. At least, I was pretty certain it was him. It was hard to tell because he was wearing a balaclava.

'Such a *pillock*,' he muttered, throwing the ruler at me.

I smiled. It was definitely Callum Brenner. He leapt off the windowsill.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' he snapped. 'It's almost six! We're supposed to be at the meeting!'

My eyes bugged. 'You mean . . .'

Callum rolled his eyes. 'Yes, wussbag, *the meeting*! Tonight's the night – remember? The night it all happens! Everything we've been planning! You. Me.' He struck a dramatic pose. '*The Tornado Chasers*.'

That was how it began, in one respect. How I was able to escape my bedroom, and leave the village, and go chasing a huge tornado across the valleys. But it doesn't explain the whole story. It doesn't say *why* we decided to do it in the first place – risk our lives, break the law, do the unthinkable. And most times, the *why* is much more important than the *how*. I know that now.

So I'm going to go back to the day it *really* began – a week earlier, my very first day in Barrow.

The first day I met Callum Brenner.