

The Doorway of Wonderful Things

Sally Taylor creeps into the corridor between the science wing and the old mathematics block and glances around, heart pounding. Somewhere, Jessica Hardman is waiting to pounce. It's as inevitable as Sally passing her maths test this afternoon with top marks. It's just a matter of when it'll happen.

Her mobile plays the opening chords of *Best Song Ever*, and her stomach lurches; sweat trickles down the inside of her blouse. She doesn't even bother to check the message out. It'll be a text from Jessica, something dripping with menace.

Making sure she keeps her back to the wall with the least number of doors on it she scuttles crab-like in the direction of classroom R13. Although she's not particularly superstitious, the room number heightens her sense of dread. The number is the same as her age – and so far, with the transfer to this new school in this new town, the year has taken a turn for the unluckiest it could possibly be.

She hears the distant sound of the other schoolkids in the playground – it's morning break, and Sally is trying to take advantage of everyone being outside to get to the sanctuary of her next lesson early. With luck, Jessica and her gang will be in the playground too, not figuring out what she's doing.

But luck isn't with her. Without warning a muscular arm grabs her from behind as she's passing R5, and she's forced backwards into the classroom.

The arm has folded itself around her chest, and when he jiggles it up and down she realises the thug holding her has grabbed her there deliberately, enjoying the bulge of her young breasts beneath her blouse and bra. He squeezes tighter, his other arm circling her waist and lifting her bodily from the floor.

"Be careful, Terry," a female voice drawls from behind, and the thug swings her round to face its owner. "It might break."

There's a toadying laugh from Terry and three other kids in the room, and Jessica Hardman drifts forward to stand, face thrust to within six inches of Sally's, contemptuous eyes boring into hers. Sally recoils, body writhing, head pressed back into the thug's chest in an effort to distance herself from the sneering face. Jessica leans forward to hiss in her ear: "Don't make a sound, okay? Else you know what we can do to you!" An involuntary sob escapes from Sally's lips. This girl can hurt!

Hands pat the pockets of her regulation black school trousers. Her mobile is lifted and tossed carelessly back to one of the toadying sidekicks, a girl with blonde hair in a long ponytail. The girl begins to press keys, and Sally cries, "Don't!" Terry's arm squeezes tighter, crushing the breath from her body. Sally's sure that the girl is going through her contacts,

and probably selecting one to abuse.

Jessica Hardman gives an angry growl: "Where is it?" She yanks Sally's hair, forcing her head to one side, and Sally cries out in pain. "Quiet, I said! Where's your locker key?"

"In – in my blouse pocket," Sally sobs, as quietly as she can.

Terry has her blouse pocket covered with his arm. Jessica gives him an angry glare. "Terry, you tool!"

"Well, you said grab 'er." Terry shifts his arm from around her bust and digs into the pocket, taking the opportunity to have a lingering grope around with his hand. "Y'ar," he says, holding out the key.

Jessica snatches it from him. "Right, bitch," she snarls in Sally's face, "tell you how it's gonna be. You beat me in the backstroke race yesterday – there ain't no-one getting the better of me in the pool. Just for that, we're gonna take your costume so you can't practise tonight." She gives Sally a kick on the ankle, which brings more tears of pain to her eyes. "And if you ever – ever! – beat me in anything again..." She thrusts her face even further into Sally's: "I'll let these four loose on you. Geddit?!"

Sally nods slowly, frozen with fear. "As it is," Jessica growls, her voice low and dangerous, "I think we'll leave you with a little punishment anyway." With a swift movement she jabs her fist into Sally's stomach, driving the breath out of her even more effectively than Terry's squeezing.

Jessica makes a sign and Terry drops Sally; she crashes to the floor. Jessica Hardman looms over her and reaches down to give another yank at her hair. "And another thing, bitch! You're gonna fail the maths test this afternoon, right? If you don't..."

Leaving the threat hanging in the air, Jessica releases her, turns and stomps away. Laughing uproariously, the others follow her out of the room, the blonde girl giving her a final kick as she passes.

Sally lies on the floor, her body heaving with sobs, her mind screaming. *No! Not my maths test. I can't fail my maths test, Mum and Dad'll be so disappointed, and so will Mrs Bullow. But if I don't fail...*

She lies there a few minutes. She doesn't hear anyone enter, but suddenly a soft voice makes her jump in fright: "So, they like to throw their weight around, do they?"

She jerks her head up and swipes her eyes with the back of her hand. The African face of Mr Ikwondo, the school caretaker, swims into view. "I – I'm sorry?" she stutters.

He regards her with an expression that seems part pity, part fury. "Your friends," he says. "They like to throw their weight around."

“N–no,” she says, whipping her head from side to side violently, as if to deny it to herself as well as him. “I d–don’t know what you mean. I – I slipped and fell. B–banged my knee. It hurt.”

He smiles, his eyes radiating compassion. “Come up, child,” he says, and reaches a hand down to help her to her feet.

She hesitates. Maggie, her best friend, is sure that Mr Ikwondo is a paedophile – he spends a lot of time watching the school kids really closely, she says. Mr Ikwondo appears to know what she’s thinking. “Don’t worry, child. I won’t hurt you.”

Reluctantly she reaches for the hand, and he hauls her upright. “Sit yourself down properly, and tell me about it.” He pulls a seat from behind a desk for her, squatting himself down on another chair, close enough to listen, but far enough away that she doesn’t feel threatened.

The story pours out of her, before she even realises she’s telling it; the swimming race, the bullying, the maths test – the threat that Jessica’s left in the air. He raises an eyebrow when she’s finished. “And ain’t you ever thought of reporting this?”

Sally drops her head. “No – no, I can’t,” she mumbles.

“Oh? And why not?”

Sally stares at the floor, unwilling to meet his gaze. “They’re too powerful. They’d get me before anything could be done to stop them. And Jessica’s dad holds a lot of sway locally too. He doesn’t think that Jessica can do the least thing wrong – I know he’d cause trouble for my parents if I complained, and that would make it even worse.”

“And you believe they have that much influence.” It was a statement, not a question.

She nods, feeling miserable. “Jessica’s had it in for me practically since we got here. She knows I’m better than her at nearly everything, and she can’t stand it. I thought we might be friends once – but she didn’t want to know, and she’s got her gang around her to back her up.”

“Oh child,” he says, his voice full of sorrow, “don’t you know you don’t have to put up with bullying? It can be combated. All you have to do is have courage.”

“I wish I could believe that,” she whispers. “But I just can’t take that chance.”

Mr Ikwondo stands up decisively. “I know what you need,” he tells her, turning towards the classroom door. “You need a touch of R and R to help you over this.”

She stares after him. At the door he glances over his shoulder. “You coming, child? There’s something I want you to see.”

She hesitates. Supposing Maggie's right? But, she quickly reconsiders, Mr Ikwondo hasn't seemed in the least bit menacing so far.

She makes up her mind and stands. Mr Ikwondo leads her along the corridor and unlocks a door near the fire exit at the end. She recognises it as his office, off-limits to the children and always kept locked if Mr Ikwondo is out and about fixing something in the school. She hesitates again for a second, but then nudges her fears to one side and follows him through the entrance.

The room is large, much larger than she'd expected from the outside. It is neat, cupboards dominating one side, and a variety of charts and diagrams adorning the wall to her left. She swivels her head to see a workbench on the wall behind her, a complicated tangle of wiring protruding from a metal box-frame on it, some repairing he's working on, she guesses. Intriguingly, there's no window on the far wall like there are in all the classrooms, which look out onto the school playing field. Instead, a doorway stands there, an ordinary-looking frame of wood, green-painted in contrast to the whitewashed walls and ceiling. The doorway has no door.

The thought strikes her that it must lead to the outside of the building, but she can see nothing through it – no daylight, no school field. Nothing but blackness, in fact. It's only then that she notices he's turned on the striplight as he's entered, its diffused glow reflecting from the surroundings. It's the only source of light in the room.

"I only got one chair, I'm afraid." His voice startles her attention back to him.

"I – I'm okay, thanks." She stands there, as close to the exit as she can, and he seats himself in a cheap-looking wheeled office chair and regards her with a thoughtful expression.

"You like tea?" He wheels himself over to the workbench. A kettle, previously unnoticed by Sally, is switched on and two mugs taken from a cupboard nearby. "Sugar?" He places a tea-bag in each mug.

"One, please." She's not sure she should be accepting his hospitality like this, but at the moment she has nowhere to run. *Why hasn't the bell rung for mid-morning lessons?*

The kettle boils and he pours water onto the tea-bags. He takes two small tubs of artificial milk from a drawer and pours one into each mug, then spoons a white substance into hers. He hands her the tea and watches as she sips it. She in turn stares at him, still wondering if she's safe.

"You know, child," he repeats his earlier assertion, "this Jessica you're so afraid of don't really have no power over you if you don't let her?"

She closes her eyes. "I really do wish I could believe that. But it's too dangerous..."

He breathes in deeply. “Hmm. You intrigued by my doorway?”

The change in subject throws her. “I – um – yes.”

“The Doorway of Wonderful Things, I call it. What you thinking about it?”

“Um – I was wondering where it went to,” she says distractedly. She’s also thinking that the drink she’s holding is sweet and delicious, unknown flavours mingling with taste of tea itself. It seems to be having a calming effect on her, with each sip she becomes not so anxious. She takes a final sip, and wonders how she’s finished it so quickly. How long has she been here? She stares into the mug.

“Why don’t you walk through and find out?”

“Hmm?”

“My doorway. Go through if you want.”

“Yes.” She says it dreamily, and is moving forwards even as she speaks. Her head feels slightly disconnected from the rest of her body, light and free. The doorway fills her vision, and she strides through without a second thought.

She steps into a tropical paradise. Sand so white and smooth its beauty makes her gasp. It stretches to infinity on both sides, a world’s length in each direction. Glancing up, the sky is the perfect blue of the loveliest summer day she can imagine – a hint of indigo at the edges, as if seen through polarized lenses. She experiences, rather than sees, all the other colours of the spectrum mixed into that glorious sky. And beyond those, the two opposite extremes of ultra-violet and infra-red. She gazes, open-mouthed at the beauty of it all, wondering how she got here.

A faint memory stirs her mind – something about – about... A doorway of some kind? And running away from something? She can’t remember. But it isn’t important. What’s important is what’s happening now.

Gently-rolling breakers lap onto the shore in front of her, a few hundred yards away, but she can already tell that the water is crystal clear, the reflection of the sky is so vivid. It calls to her to come and have some fun, so she slips off her school shoes and socks, relishing the warm sand between her toes. She runs lightly down towards the sea, following the siren-call to the very edge. The water waits for her, then rushes to meet her as she arrives. Laughing, she dances backwards before the breakers can wash over her feet. *Fooled you!* she giggles.

It’s the perfect place for making wishes, and she closes her eyes and wishes for a swimming costume. She opens them then – and there it is, laying on the sand beside her, a swirl of rainbow colours to match the ones she can feel in the sky. It’s only natural that she strips off her school clothing and hurries into it, totally unselfconscious, knowing she’s un-overlooked. The costume is a perfect fit. A large, fluffy towel, warm and soft-looking, and

with the same multi-hued countenance as her costume invites her to wrap herself up in it. But first...

She scoots to the water's edge and plunges in. The water envelops her, cool, but not cold. She swims, strongly at first, then more relaxed, turning on her back to gaze at the sky. Something in the atmosphere seems to be working on her mind, calming her anxieties and getting rid of her –. Her –. She can't remember what it's getting rid of. She performs a lazy backstroke, the water parting before her like the Red Sea before Moses.

After a long while she emerges, and lays on the towel letting the warmth of the sun flow through her. Her body feels relaxed, almost jellified. She's not sure if she falls asleep, but when she seems to wake her brain is strong and clear, and she knows that – that – whatever was wrong, is wrong no more.

Soon, all too soon, she feels it's time to go. She takes off the costume and finishes drying herself with the towel, luxuriating in its cocoon-like softness. Her school clothes are waiting for her, and then, absurdly, there is a doorway, shimmering in the middle of the sand like a spectre. Making sure she takes the costume and towel with her, the one wrapped securely in the other, she steps through as though it's the most natural thing in the world.

When she comes to she is sitting in Mr Ikwondo's chair in his office. She starts, swinging her head around wildly. Apart from herself, the office is empty. She stands, and opens the door to the corridor. Taking a last glance backwards, she hurries to her next lesson in room R13. Just the same as my age, she thinks. That's lucky, somehow.

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She breezes through the maths test that afternoon, every answer and formula coming to her like she was Rachel Riley on Countdown. She's thinking more clearly than ever before, and feels fantastic. At the end of the test she strides out of the room confident that she will be top of the class. Where she belongs.

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A group of yobs catch up with her during afternoon break. They pin her against the wall in one of the science-block classrooms, and the leader, a hard-faced girl who Sally can't remember if she recognises or not, grabs her blouse and thrusts her face into Sally's. Sally wonders what on Earth they're doing. Why have they attacked her like this? She gazes at them with interest, unafraid.

"I told you!" the hard-faced girl snarls. "But I was watching you during the test – you looked like you was enjoying it. Tell me you wasn't. Tell me you was answering everything wrong!"

Sally wonders what she's on about. She looks at the girl with eyebrows raised, which

seems to wind her up. "What you looking at, bitch?"

"Just trying to work out why you're attacking me. Do I know you?"

The girl gasps: "You little..."

"Tell you a story," Sally interrupts her, the words tumbling out before she even thinks of them. She sees a puzzled expression come over the girl's face, mirrored by the others in the group.

The story Sally tells is fantastic, surprising even herself as she's telling it. It involves the school caretaker, his office, a doorway set into the wall at the far end, and a tropical paradise. As she speaks, she can tell that the others become enraptured. Their faces take on expressions of wonder, even the leader's ugly mouth parting in an 'o' of excitement. "Show me!" the girl breathes when she's finished. "Show me it all!"

They pull her out into the corridor. "It's only a story," Sally tries to tell them, amused by their acceptance of the tale, but every one of them seems suddenly desperate to reach Mr Ikwondo's office, and none of them listen to her. "You won't open it," she tells them as they reach the office door. "If it's not there, he keeps it locked."

The chief yob tries the handle anyway, and to Sally's great surprise the door swings open. "Oh yeah?" the girl says, and the five rush through, almost shoving each other out of the way in their hurry. Sally is left in the corridor, and shakes her head. *Oh well*, she thinks. *I did try to tell you*. Then, turning on her heels she heads off towards her next classroom. Within yards she's totally forgotten all about the hard-faced girl and her gang, the caretaker's office, and any kind of doorway.

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Mr Ikwondo strolls into his office and glances at The Doorway of Wonderful Things. Through it he can hear distant sounds of pleasure, children calling to each other, laughing, running through sand, splashing around in the sea. Then, as quickly as thought, the noises change. A snarling sound arises, screams of terror fill the air, noises of biting, ripping, snapping. A final agonised screech cuts through the rest, then just as quickly as the noises began, silence falls.

Unhurriedly, Mr Ikwondo opens a cupboard door and takes out a rip saw and a large mallet. Just as languidly he sets to work dismantling The Doorway of Wonderful Things, hammering off the lintel, then taking down each jamb and sawing it in half. He replaces his tools in the cupboard, pushing in the green-painted wood beside them. Then he closes the cupboard with a tiny smile of satisfaction. Finally, he leaves his office, locking the door behind him.

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The police become involved later that night, after the missing children's frantic parents have

established that their offspring are nowhere to be found. As the school was the last place in which they'd been sighted, it's the first to be searched, and Mr Ikwondo, the headmaster and the school secretary, the main keyholders, are summoned to attend. The police, a force of about twenty constables, check everywhere with a thoroughness appropriate to children going absent. By five o'clock in the morning they are satisfied that there is no trace of the missing five. The inspector in charge tells them the search will have to be widened. They leave.

Before they go, WPC Claire Batson closes the door of the final cupboard to have been checked in the caretaker's office. It had contained, as expected, various tools, appliances, ropes, spare light-bulbs, cleaning apparatus and odds and ends – a few bits of green-painted timber, screws and nails, a school caretaker's stock-in-trade. No bodies. She glances out of the window at the back of the room as the early dawn light begins to creep upwards from behind the school playing field. She hopes to God the kids will be found okay. Smiling her thanks at the caretaker, she leaves the office and joins her colleagues heading towards their Vauxhall Astras.

Mr Ikwondo relocks his office door and, after a brief consultation with the headmaster and secretary, goes home. And Sally Taylor, fast asleep in her bedroom, sleeps dreamlessly on, with no idea of the drama involving her place of education.

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Ten days later, reports come in of five schoolchildren, three girls and two boys, washed up on a beach a few miles away from the school. The bodies of the children – what's left of them – are so mutilated, their faces display such a rictus of terror that the couple who find them are referred immediately to a counselling service. The bodies are wearing swimming costumes, all identically dull black. There is no doubting who they are, and immediate enquiries are launched into how they came to be at the seaside when they should have been safe at home – and, what on Earth might have happened to them. No conclusion is reached – not one witness comes forward, no ravaging sea monsters are found, although it is suspected that sharks must have strayed into the area and taken the children by surprise, and soon the investigation, though thoroughly conducted, is dropped. A verdict of death by misadventure is declared at the coroner's court, the children are released to be buried, and a period of mourning begins for their friends and family.

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Sally strides down the corridor towards her after-school swimming gala, at which she is expecting to win several races. She feels excited, even though there has just been a memorial service for the children who so tragically died. No-one that she knew, or can recall ever seeing. Although they were in the same year as Sally, it's a big school with many classes. She dismisses the tragedy from her mind.

On the way to the changing room, she stops by her locker to pick up her costume. Shutting the locker, she makes sure to take the key and put it into her pocket – a couple of weeks ago she'd thought she'd lost the key, then found it sitting in the lock where she must have carelessly left it. She must be more careful, she thinks to herself.

Her costume is vividly rainbow-coloured, and is wrapped in a large, fluffy, similarly-hued towel. Briefly, as she always does when she sees it, she tries to remember where she got it from – but then, it doesn't really matter, it's just perfect for her. Whistling happily, she steps on towards the swimming pool.