

## Snake Bite

by Michael Callaghan

I wave to my dad as he drives off, and push open the door of the library. It's heavy and I have to use both hands to move it. It opens with a low, scraping, groaning noise; like it was asleep and I've disturbed it and it *really* didn't want to open. When I finally get in and let it go it slams behind me with a loud echoing bang.

I wince. Everyone knows that noise is a *baaad* thing in a library.

It's the first time I've been here. I like old buildings, especially old library buildings. I like the high ceilings and the big arched windows and those grainy white wall tiles. I like the stillness and the quiet and that rich, dark-brown smell of wood and leather and old paper.

Maybe that's why the kids at school think I'm weird.

As I walk on I see three posters on the left wall. The first says what to do if there is a fire alarm. The second gives the opening hours. The last one that catches my attention. It's a **POLICE NOTICE**, warning people to be on alert. It shows a hand drawn picture of a man. He has a mean, thin-eyed, expression and a stubbly chin. It's not a very good picture – it doesn't look like any real life person – but before I can read the notice I hear a cough. Not a real cough, like when you have a cold or something catches in your throat. It's a can-I-have-your-attention cough.

I turn and see the librarian. He's standing behind a long, horseshoe-shaped wooden desk, staring at me. I wonder how long he's been looking at me. He has a grey, scraggy beard that looks oddly patchy - like someone has pulled bits out of it - and silver rimless glasses that are too small for his face. He smiles, but in an odd way. Like something's going on in his head. It strikes me that he might be the sort of man that my dad tells me to be careful of.

But my dad worries too much.

"Can I help you ...Sonny?"

He pauses before he says *Sonny*, and he pronounces his *s*'s in a funny way. Slightly too long. It reminds me of the snake in *Jungle Book*; the one that pretends to be all nice to Mowgli - even while he's wrapping his coils round him. Tighter and tighter. Getting ready to *snap*.

"I just want to read a book, Mister." I don't smile back.

He makes a sad face.

"A book? Oh *dear*. I'm afraid you *can't* take books out unless you're a member. And you can't be a member unless you've got identification and one of your parents okays it."

I make my own sad face. "I don't want to take a book out. I just want to read a book. Here. My dad told me to come in here."

This is true, but that seems to trouble him even more. He rubs his top lip with his forefinger. It looks like he's rubbing off spit.

"All alone?" he says finally. "What age are you, I wonder? Nine?"

He's started to talk very quietly. Like he's talking to himself.

"Ten."

"Ten? Hmm..." He looks behind me, to the wall. I turn and realise he's looking at the **POLICE NOTICE.**

"I'm surprised at your dad. Hasn't he told you about the ...disappearances?"

(..disappearances..)

"We're new here." I say. "Just moved this week. What disappearances?" But before he can answer I say:

"My dad was just going to ASDA. He dropped me here and said he'd be about an hour and then he'd be back for me."

"About an hour? That so." He nods, like he's thinking, and does the lip rubbing thing again.

"Well...you may as well know...some children have gone missing . Unpleasant business. It's got everyone quite...uptight." He gives his odd smile when he says the word "uptight", for some reason. As if it's funny that people are uptight. Then he sighs.

"Well I don't think I want to send you back out if you're on your own. Not with all this, ahem, *business* going on." He flicks his head in the direction of the back of the library. "The children's section is at the back. No *Harry Potters* left but you might find a *Percy Jackson*."

He lowers his eyes to something in front of him, and then, like an afterthought, raises them once more.

"And don't worry. You're safe here. I'll look after you." And he smiles that smile again.

I shrug and walk past him. It's early, and the main library is mostly empty, save for a homeless man who has his head down on a desk, asleep, and a woman reading a magazine and making shushy noises to a buggy she's rocking. There is indeed a children's section at the back. It's not very big. There are four book cases, five green plastic seats, and a small table with drawing paper and crayons.

I scan the shelves, looking for an Alex Rider - I don't really like Percy Jackson - and that's when I see the little boy.

He is wearing a cartoon t-shirt – it shows SpongeBob hugging his friend Patrick with the caption “*Best Friends!*” underneath - and pale blue cotton shorts. He is sitting at one of the tables, reading a *Thomas the Tank Engine* book.

I smile - I used to love *Thomas* myself - and sit down across from him with *Stormbreaker*. I’ve read it six times but it’s the only Alex Rider they’ve got.

The boy stares at me, the way that little kids do. He has yellow curly hair that straggles down over his forehead, and huge brown eyes. He looks about four or five.

“It’s boring here.” he announces, as if he knows me. “There’s nothing to do.”

“You can read.” I say, pointing at his book.

He scowls, and puts *Thomas* down. “Reading’s boring.” He folds his arms and starts rocking, crossly, in his seat. I wonder about the paper and crayons, but I guess he’s the sort of kid who doesn’t have the patience for drawing.

I put down my book too. I realise I’ll not be reading today.

“What do you like doing?”

His eyes brighten. “Soldiers. And hide and seek.”

I lean back in my own seat, and rock back and forth, mimicking him. “All right.” I say. “Let’s play hide and seek.”

He stops rocking, and giggles. “That’s silly. There’s nowhere to hide.

I look around, then point at the back wall. There is a door with a bar across it with the words “FIRE EXIT” on it.

“Out there.” I say.

“Outside?” His face falls again. “I’m not *allowed* out on my own.”

I nod. “It’s all right. I’ll be there. So you’re not on your own.”

He considers this. He looks down in the direction of the librarian and back towards the door. Then he giggles again. “All right.” he says. “All right.” He jumps up. He is happy now; excited. You *can* have fun in a library!

We walk to the door and I push down the metal bar. Unlike the main door it opens without a squeak. Outside is a lane, deserted except for a stray cat, scrabbling in the dirt, two green bins, and a parked white van.

I look around. “Come on.” I say. I take him by the hand.

We step out and I close the door, gently, behind us. The day will heat up later; but now, outside the warmth of the library, there’s an early morning chill.

“Where will I hide?” he says. He shivers and rubs his arms.

“Wait.” I say.

I walk to the van, and tug the back door. It’s not locked and I open it wide. Inside it’s empty, save for an upside down packing crate.

“Come on.” I say, and I step in.

He follows me in, and sits immediately on the crate; holding himself straight, with his hands on his knees, like he’s paying attention at school. I sit on the floor in front of him.

The van smells clean. Too clean. It makes my eyes and nose sting. He looks around curiously. I don’t. I don’t want to look around this van. Not at him either. Not at his SpongeBob t-shirt, or his curly yellow hair, or his big brown eyes.

Finally he chuckles. “I wonder if Daddy knows I’m gone yet.”

His dad is the librarian, I realise.

“I’ll go check.” I say. “Quiet as a mouse now.” I put my fingers to my lips.

I stand up and get out of the van again. He puts his own finger to his lips, and giggles again. Then I close the door, softly, behind me, walk to the passenger side of the van and climb in.

My dad grunts as he starts the engine.

“There’s a poster up.” I say, and we drive off.

WORD COUNT -1494 WORDS