

Cowardly Frank

By Rufus Offor

Published by Rufus Offor

Copyright 2012 Rufus Offor

Dedicated to Ian and Anne Offor

My best friends and parents.

The two most selfless people I've ever known.

Part One

Chapter One

Frank was lying in a bush. It was summer and he was wearing nothing but thin shorts and a T-shirt. Unfortunately the bush was covered in lots of tiny annoying spikes that pierced him and made him itch maddeningly, which was making it very difficult to use the bush for its intended purpose; that being to hide him from the fearsome things he was convinced were out to get him. He needed to be very still and very quiet but it was proving to be nearly impossible. Luckily his fear over powered his desire to itch so, with great discomfort, he was managing to stay still none the less.

Frank didn't get out of the house very often. When he did it was because he'd been ordered to go to the shop and buy sandwich supplies by his mother, Gladys. She didn't like going outside and hadn't done so since Frank's father had died when Frank was four.

His Mum was a strange sort of person and was always coming up with outlandish ingredients to put in sandwiches. Potato chips, lettuce, sardines and chocolate shavings were today's experiment though he didn't have to buy the sardines as his Mum had won a competition from one of her rather boring magazines, the ones with pictures of gardens in the country in it, knitting advice and free crochet patterns and the prize had been a lifetime supply of the tinned, nasty, slimy fish.

He was learning to hate tinned fish.

He'd taken a long time to get to the shop, as he always did. The shop was only a five minute walk away but Frank was such a cautious creature that he'd crouch in every available hiding spot along the way in dread of the many terrible things that lurked around every corner, well, at least the terrible things that his Mum said lurked around every corner, as I said, she was a bit of an odd sort of woman.

Gladys had sent him to the shops later than usual and by the time he got there and started to head back, with all the hiding stops and all, the sun was going down. Frank was scared of most things but the dark, well, the dark is scary to most people at some point in their lives but to Frank, the dark was almost crippling. He got so scared of the dark sometimes that moving around in it would make his thin feeble bones creek and crack and his jaw ache from his heavily clenched teeth. Sometimes it was so bad that the tension would freeze him dead still.

Frank knew that one of the first signs of approaching darkness was long shadows. As the sun went down it made all the shadows get bigger and bigger until they spread all over the land and darkness came. Dark hours, “the horror time” as his Mum called it, which didn’t make him feel any better about the whole thing in the slightest.

On his way back from the shops the shadows had started to get very long indeed. He struggled up the hill with the sun glaring in his face, which made him squint his huge bulging. He hadn’t looked back and so had failed to see the darkness creep up on him like a villain. As he approached his first hiding spot he glanced over his shoulder to make sure no monsters had decided to come out before nightfall and there, on the pavement, stretching back five meters, was a terrifying dark moving shape. It had huge long gangly arms and legs and a positively gigantic head.

Panic gripped him, he lost all control of his reason and started squealing uncontrollably. He ran and ran in random directions. If you can imagine a huge rubber bouncy ball being fired out of a canon, ricocheting off the walls of a long narrow corridor, then you’d probably get a good idea of what Frank looked like. He boinged and bounced off walls, went spinning off lamp posts, fired off gates and fences until, out of the corner of his panicking and massive worried eye, he saw a bush and hurled himself headlong into it.

Most people when throwing themselves into a spiky bush would do everything they could to get out of it and normally Frank would too but today Frank felt differently. For him the bush and its prickly nastiness was a relief from the blind terror he’d felt just seconds earlier. He’d much rather be pricked and

poked than terrorised by an immense shadowy fiend. He lay there in pain. At least in the bush the huge, black, gangly bigheaded ogre couldn't see him.

Nobody in the history of human kind has ever been as scared of their own shadow as Frank was on that balmy summer evening.

Anyone who has ever played hide and seek knows that when you're trying to be still, quiet and unfound, that you're breathing is at its loudest. Every breath in blows a gale and every breath out sounds like a hurricane. It's a strange occurrence and there have been many theories about why it happens. Some people believe that there are things called 'hide and seek goblins' that have invisible megaphones. They invisibly hold them up in front of your face to make sure that the seekers can hear where you are. Hide and seek goblins love being secret and don't like other beings stealing their thunder. They get their revenge by going out of their way to try and spoil things for anyone who's trying to be sneakier than them. This, of course, is why people hold their breath when hiding, so as to avoid the goblin megaphones.

Frank's Mum believed in hide and seek goblins and had told Frank about them on many occasions. Frank believed that Hide and seek goblins were part of why his head was so unnaturally big. He had spent so much time hiding and holding his breath that his head had been blown up like a balloon and his eyes had gone all bulgy.

Frank wasn't very fond of his big head. He couldn't do very much about it though as his cowardice was much more powerful than his feelings about his massive melon. One good thing had come of it all though, he had managed to master the art of tiny breathing. He would take the tiniest of tiny breaths in, and let the tiniest of tiny breaths out. This made almost no noise at all, which helped him avoid any meddlesome hide and seek goblins that might happen to be in the area.

A lot of people think that hide and seek goblins aren't real, but then some people still believe that the world is flat so not everyone can be trusted in these matters.

It wasn't long before a new fear started to creep up on Frank. He'd been lying in the bush for so long that the sun had started to sink down over the horizon,

spreading the night's inky sticky blackness over the world. "The horror time" was coming.

"Oh my goodness!" Frank's shaky voice muttered inside his head, "Oh deary deary me, the shadows are getting big! Will they take over? Will all the monsters come out to play? What a silly question Frank, of course they will. That's what monsters do. Mum says so. Oh my deary deary me what am I to do?"

He braved a turn of his head to look back at where the monster had been. The bush's thorns bit him, scraped him and the rustling of its branches were far too loud for comfort.

"Oh crikey... oh my goodness gracious what a horrible situation." He muttered to himself as his eyes darted around in a panic.

He waited for a little while longer to see if the shadows, which were getting bigger and bigger, would slow down a bit. He hoped against hope that they might even start getting smaller again. This was a ridiculous thing to try and believe as it would have meant that the sun would stop going down, and start coming up again, which hardly ever happens.

The shadows got bigger.

He twisted his head again, desperately trying not to make any noise. It felt like the thorns would burst his balloon like head, particularly with all the pressure that was building up inside it from being so scared. The fear of having a popped head, however, was no match for his fear of the dark.

"Maybe Mum will come and find me," he thought in a moment of madness, "oh don't be a silly sausage Frank, you know that she can't go out of the house. There are things outside that want to get her." Frank's Mum believed that there were a million creeping murderous and violent things lurking outside of her house. She made Frank go out because he was smaller and quicker than her. He could outrun them where she was too fat and slow to do so.

He turned his head a little more and finally managed to turn it far enough to see where the monster had been.

It had grown.

It was big enough to cover the whole street now. Frank's eyes widened in terror, his bulbous head felt like it would swell until it got to the size of a hot air balloon. He turned his head the other way and the monster was there too.

"Oh crikey, oh blimey, oh good grief it's everywhere! What if it already caught me? What if it's already eaten me? What if I'm in its tummy right now? What will I do, won't someone come and help me?"

He started to shiver violently, making the bush cut him like barbed wire.

"Oh no... I've gone and ended up as dinner!" The thought was too much for his fragile frame.

Panic slapped Frank hard on the cheek. He yelped like a dog caught in a fox trap, yanked and scratched his poor prickled body out of the bush and ran home in a high-speed blur of misery, the clammy night stifling his breath every frenzied step of the way.

Frank's Mum was sitting in the kitchen tapping her foot... a lot. She had a habit of sitting in the same spot, biting her nails and tapping her foot nervously on the hard wood floor. She tapped her foot so much and so often that she had worn the spot almost down to a hole. Every few weeks she had to change her foot tapping position just before her foot disappeared into the floor. The flooring was a patchy mess of random wood, nailed in at unconventional angles in a desperate attempt to stop the whole kitchen disappearing into the basement, which it threatened to do at any time.

She wasn't biting her nails today. She'd bitten them so much that they were sore and bleeding. She put some sticky plasters over most of them and had dipped them in special foul tasting smelly wax. This was so she wouldn't try and bite off the plasters without meaning to and have a bit of a nibble at the stumpy fingers underneath.

Frank's Mum's name was Gladys. She was short and round and had little clumps of hair missing from her scalp. Some of the bald patches were there because she worried so much that her hair just upped and left. Other parts

were bald because she would pull clumps out with her own hands during fits of worry.

She was in a bit of a tizzy that day because Frank had spent such a long time getting back from the shop. It was getting dark outside and she bare the thought of him being out when it was dark. That was when all the really nasty things came out to play.

She'd laid out all the things that she needed on the kitchen bench. The big knife, butter knife and chopping board were exactly three centimetres away from each other and perfectly parallel. She knew that they were three centimetres from each other because she always measured the distance with a ruler. She'd spent most of the afternoon making sure that everything to make the sandwiches was set out with unreasonable neatness.

She'd sent Frank off to the shops late because she decided to try out a new ingredient; chocolate shavings. This had made her spend an extra hour choosing what sort of thing the shavings should be put in. She'd tried bowls, plates, cups, glasses, empty Tupperware and even an old purse she'd found in the bottom drawer. Finally, she decided on a sugar bowl she'd found in the attic. After that, she had to try and figure out how the bowl would be made to fit into the array of other plates, bowls, knives and chopping boards.

The whole time Frank had been hiding in the bush scared of his own shadow, Gladys had spent in some very well used worry time. When he burst through the back door, puffing and panting like an old nag that'd been forced to carry a big Father Christmas around the world because his reindeer had all caught chicken pox, she was so tense that she gave off a high pitched and wobbly squeal. She was extremely relieved, desperately surprised and awfully angry all at the same time, which made her face and voice do some very strange contortions and warbles.

"OH MY GOODNESS FRANK... WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN!?" she squawked.

"Well..." said Frank between gasps, shakes, sweats and pants, but he didn't get to finish the sentence as his Mother was already interrupting.

“Oh the horror of my imaginings dear boy! I can’t begin to explain the awfulness of the things that I’d pictured happening to you!”

“Well Mum...” Frank managed to blurt out but was interrupted yet again by Gladys’ twittering. It was as if she didn’t want to hear him, that she was only concerned with her own worried state, that her anguish was all that mattered. It crossed Frank’s mind that he needn’t be there at all, that she’d keep warbling on if he just crept up to his room.

“I had visions of great swooping sharp clawed flying lizards, plummeting down from the skies to steal you away. I thought of you being squished by some mighty giant’s clomping foot, balls of lightning hitting you and turning you into a blackened charcoal pile of dust, evil thumping monsters doing what they do best and munching you up like a well made sandwich...”

Gladys’ terrible speech went on for an age. Frank started to think the same thing he often thought when Gladys started ranting, he thought that he might try and make some sort of dummy that looked just like him and place it on a chair in the kitchen. He doubted that his Mother would ever notice the difference. He could go and do something constructive like trying to calm down after his terrifying ordeal with the huge black ground monster or as you and I know it, his shadow.

“Vicious hell hounds tearing at you, ripping you limb from limb as they are prone to do on terrible nights like this...” according to Gladys, every night was a terrible night like this. There had never been, to Frank’s memory, anything other than terrible nights like this.

She took the bag of shopping from Frank and went over to the kitchen bench where she had prepared the sandwich making equipment, never once stopping her preposterous talk, never once slowing down to give Frank the hug he so desperately needed.

“Teams of malicious ninjas carrying all manner of prickly bristly weapons, running through the town perishing all that they came across...”

On and on she went unravelling horror after horror. With each new dreadful imagining Frank grew more and more tense, which was the last thing he needed.

Most people have a point at which it is impossible to become more nervous. Frank hadn't found that point yet. Most people get to a point where they can't possibly become more tense and usually end up in hospital somewhere, but not Frank. He just kept getting more and more anxious without having any break downs or health issues or anything like that. It was as if his head soaked up the tension like a sponge. A huge planet sized sponge. The more nervousness you filled Frank up with the bigger his sponge got, but the smaller and smaller he felt.

He was a strange looking creature with his big head and eyes, but his nose and mouth were small and twitchy like a frightened rodent's.

"Billowing ghostly mists that roll over the land, eating up all the people they come across and leaving nothing behind but their clothes and teeth..." Frank's Mum continued as she carefully, but with shaky hands, added the chocolate shavings to the sugar bowl pinch by tiny pinch.

"A bad tempered wizard taking you away to work in his kitchen, making you prepare twisted wizard food like peppered muffins, wood-chip pasta and deep fried frog fingers with ice-cream, with you chained to an angry weasel the whole time as you worked your fingers to the bone..." she went on as they sat down to eat the insane sandwiches, "awful sock pixies stealing your shoes to get at your nice woolly

socks while the rest of you is stripped bare by T-shirt monkeys, short trouser grumpies and under pant trolls."

They finished their meal and had tea in the television room. They didn't watch the television, but Gladys kept it because it reminded her of her dead husband who would watch the game shows every night after dinner. Gladys believed that all the programs were trying to get her to go outside of the house. They would try and make her believe that there were no monsters out there, but she knew different. Game shows tried to convince you that everything was bright and happy and then there was the news. As far as Gladys was concerned the news managed to miss out all the real things that were happening, the real and terrifying truths of the planet like marauding ninjas and bad tempered wizards that would steal children, monsters that

killed husbands. The news always tried to convince her that other things were going on, mad lies about politicians meeting in far away lands to talk about things that didn't mean anything to anyone, puffy lipped celebrities adopting children from poor countries, people going into space... that sort of thing.

Gladys knew it was all lies, or at least not the full truth. She had experienced the reality of the world. She had seen the monsters that lurked in the dark, sometimes even hid in plain view and the shock of it had changed her forever. Some of the evil out there was real, but over the years she'd managed to warp it. She had been so petrified that the whole world had turned dark, gone weird. She believed all the things that her addled brain told her even if most of them weren't true.

One bad experience had changed her forever; the death of her husband, Frank's Dad, and now she lived in a world of fear born of her own mind.

"Dangling tree hippos crunching you in their powerful jaws..." because somehow dangling tree hippos seemed more real to her than politicians.

On and on she went, right up to when Frank was being tucked into bed, "Mole dwarves that shimmer with diamond dust from their many riches, burrowing great tunnels into which you had fallen and on discovering you in their lair, turning you blind with the great shiny gemstone that they worship and making you darn their filthy socks with your sense of touch alone..."

Blah, blah, blah... on and on and on it went until she'd finished tucking him in, still ranting, and waddled out of the room. She left the light on as she always did, so that the shadow demons wouldn't get him.

The last thing Frank heard was, "dastardly wrinkled fairy cakes with the minds of crazed grave robbing feral dumpies..." and he could make out no more as she trundled off to her bedroom to imagine yet more horrors and evils.

He didn't even know what dumpies were but considering the company they were in, with mole dwarfs, vicious hell hounds, under-pant trolls and tree hippos, he didn't think they would be very pleasant at all.

Frank lay in his bed, his huge bulging eyes fixed on the stippled lumps of cheap plaster on the ceiling, trying his best to grasp just how many horrors there were in the world. Frank didn't have anyone around to tell him that most of what his mother said was nonsense. Gladys didn't even let him go to school or talk to any other people his age. All he knew of the world was what his Mother told him. But even with that, part of him doubted her. The misty memories of his father kept some hope alive in him that it wasn't all bad.

Frank wished he could have talked to Gladys about his trip to the shops. He would've liked for her to have taken pity on him and tried to make him feel better. Given him a cuddle, put some plasters on his prickled body and kissed it all better, but Frank understood how difficult it was for his Mum so he didn't try to push his point. He knew that whatever Gladys had to deal with was far worse than his trivial terror, so he just tried to forget about it and hope that he never had to go to the shops very late ever again.

After a while Frank managed to get to sleep and dreamt a long dream about a huge empty desert. A desert that was mercifully free of flying lizards, monsters and evil wizards. There was a family of white horses there, galloping and playing. There was nothing to be scared of.

The shadows were friendly in the desert of white horses.

CHAPTER 2

Frank was fond of the back garden. There was a place there where he could hide from his Mum. It sat between the side of the house and the garden fence. There was a tap there that never stopped dripping, making the dirt turn to mud. He would mix it with chopped dried grass and other things to make clay then spend hours sculpting it, making tiny versions of all the horrible things that his Mum would tell him about. The smaller he made them, the less scary they seemed.

One day, while making a three-inch tall model of a hair goblin he suddenly became aware of a footprint in the mud. It was a little shoeprint just inches away from him and it gave him a bit of a jolt.

No one ever came to visit his house and Frank hadn't seen anyone in the garden for as long as he could remember. His Dad used to love tending the garden, raking up the leaves, pruning the roses and trimming the verges. The garden had been a splendid place back then, all colour and joy but no more. Back then other children used to come around and play on the nice soft lawn. They played cricket and hide and seek among the bushes, flowers and trees. But that was so long ago that sometimes Frank thought that he'd dreamt the whole thing. Now the garden was all dried grass, dust and angry weeds. There was a shed buried in the undergrowth out there somewhere but had been unreachable for years through the thick bramble.

There hadn't been another human there for years, so who could have made the mark in the mud? He placed his foot next to it to see if he could have made it without realising, but saw that the feet were different sizes and the shoes were unusual. Frank wore trainers, the footprint looked like it had a bit of a heel to it, like posh dress shoes. There was no way imaginable that he could have made the impression. He started picturing all kinds of freaky creatures that could have snuck up on him while he wasn't looking. He was, however, in his secret place, which was there to help him calm down. So he took action immediately and began making models of all the frightening things

he could imagine that would have made the footprint. Eventually, calmed, he filled the print with mud and tried to forget about it.

Later that night when all the shadows had crept across the land his mind turned back to the footprint and, strangely, he found that the more he thought about it the calmer he became. This was not a feeling that Frank was used to. He found that the longer the feeling went on the more he noticed something odd happening to his face. The corners of his mouth were sort of stretching out toward his ears of their own will. He was smiling. It was a very peculiar feeling and Frank didn't know quite what to make of it so he just sat and enjoyed the sensation while it lasted.

The feeling was unlike anything he'd felt for a long time, since his Dad had been alive. He slept very soundly that night dreaming only of the desert, the sun shining, the puffy clouds forming animals in the sky. He watched as the family of snow white horses frolicked in between the cacti, shrubs with bright flowers and brilliant orange and red rocks. It was a fine dream and the smiling feeling stayed with him right through 'til morning.

When he woke he was surprised to find that he felt a superb sense of relief. He woke without feeling scared. This didn't last long however as his Mum began crashing around in the kitchen with her normal sense of dread and nervousness, insisting that night crawlers had burgled the house and run off with her favourite teaspoon, as teaspoons were like diamonds to night crawlers who used them to make sugar cube catapults to fire at hot beverage golems.

For some reason Gladys' noise and fuss seemed louder and more bothersome than usual after the lovely dream and the smile of the night before.

A few days later Frank was in the garden again watching some of his mud models bake. It was a glorious sunny day with clear blue skies and on days like those Frank would line up his figures along a piece of wood that sat half way up the garden fence. He liked to watch their colour change as they dried hard in the sun. In his little corner of the garden Frank could be in control of the scariest of scary things.

Frank went into a bit of a daze as he watched them drying and his mind wondered. He started to daydream. He found himself floating over the desert from his dream, being blown around on a warm lazy breeze like a feather. On and on he floated until he saw a rickety old wood shack with a rocking chair on the porch. There was a strange noise and a boy, a girl and what looked like a garden gnome appeared on the porch in a heap.

He floated down to get a better look. The boy looked at the white horses, which bowed low as if to give him permission to be there. Then his eyes went skyward. He wore a small content smile. His eye's fell on Frank and a broad grin spread across his face.

"Oh, Hello Frank." The boy said in a soft warm voice.

With these words Frank was gently drawn away from his daydream and floated back to his secret place in the back garden.

For some reason he could have sworn that the words had been spoken in the real world too. It was as if he could still hear the sound of the boy's voice echoing off the garden fence. Slightly alarmed at this Frank started looking around frantically, trying to find out where the voice had come from, but there was nobody there. He got up, his big head and bulging eyes darting from left to right, up and down searching for the source of the voice he felt sure he'd heard.

There was no one.

Then he saw them.

There in the mud were two fresh wet footprints. They were the same size as the single footprint that he'd seen just a few days before.

Usually something like that would have filled Frank with more fear than he could possibly handle but not this time. Just like his previous footprint encounter he felt strangely calm, happy and that unfamiliar thing that happened to his face the other day happened again. He smiled. He smiled a broad and refreshing smile. It felt like diving into a cool pool on a roasting summer day and the joy of it forced something else out of him. He made a

noise. The smile was so nice that it was making him make a noise, a noise that hadn't come out of him since he was a small boy.

He let out a giggle.

What was all of this about? He found himself wondering. What were all of these strange emotions and what had they to do with the footprints and the vision of the boy on the rocking chair?

He hadn't had much time to think this through, to completely enjoy the giggle and smiling when he heard his Mum yelping out from the kitchen door,

"Frank!? Good lordy Frank where are you? I hate it when you stay out there too long."

"I'm here Mum." He said popping his head around the corner, trying to hide his mud covered feet, knees and hands.

"Well stop messing around out there, get in here... I need you... and who were you talking to? I heard a voice. Some sort of strange voice, who've you been talking too? I hope you've not been cavorting with gnomes or anything. Treacherous creatures gnomes, they'll run off with all your poster paints so they can disguise toad stools as mushrooms so you'll eat them and die and long slow and painful..." She rambled on as she turned around and walked back into the house.

Frank cleaned the mud off himself quickly before rushing in to hear what else those sneaky gnomes would do when you weren't looking.

Later, once Gladys had tucked him into bed while nattering away about some scary thing or another, Frank's mind turned back to what had happened earlier in the garden. He found that something bothered him about the whole experience. He found himself wondering what his Mum had meant when she'd asked him who he'd been talking to. Could it be that Gladys had heard the same voice he thought he'd heard? What else could it be? Heaven knows there are a lot of strange things out there in the world, why couldn't such magic exist? Why couldn't his Mum have heard the voice from his dream too? If Gladys did hear the voice then it must have been real. This thought comforted Frank. He thought he'd been going mad. He thought his

head had bulged so much that his brain had gone mushy but if his Mum had heard the voice then it might mean he wasn't crazy after all. It could mean that his head wasn't about to pop under the pressure of all the worrying things in the world.

Frank grinned a big wide grin and slunk off to sleep on his massive pillow.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

