

# **A Call from the Dark**

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## How to Get Ready for Work in Half an Hour

I've never been very good at getting up early on Saturday mornings. I'm usually wasted after frying my brain all week at school and Dad never stirs unless he's working, so there's not much incentive. I used to drag myself up, get a bowl of cereal and hop back into bed, watch music videos and then go back to sleep for a couple of hours. Those awesome mornings have long gone.

I wish I hadn't taken them for granted, cause who knows if I'll ever get to sleep in again? Things have changed. I have to get up for work now, and since I walked to work I had to leave way too early. That didn't mean I get up when I should though. I always leave it as late as possible. So, on the weekend that my life took a serious plunge down the toilet, I woke up at nine after forgetting to set my alarm, leaving me only half an hour to get ready.

Unlike what I was about to go through, this was something I could handle easily.

First, I made sure I had the fastest shower possible. That's difficult. I love long, hot showers, washing my blonde hair slowly and rhythmically, just letting the steam clear my head and the soap wash all over me. It's probably the most peaceful part of the day.

Then, standing at the kitchen counter, I ate my cereal as fast as I could. I rarely eat anything else. That's probably why I'm as skinny as my dad. Sometimes I have a glass of orange drink (not orange juice, it's way too expensive), but most of the time I just wolf down the cereal and slurp the milk from the bowl.

I quickly stuck on the same clothes I'd had on the night before. I've got pretty simple tastes – jeans, white T-shirt, suede ankle boots. I wear the same thing almost every weekend. Half the time the T-shirt has fallen off the chair in my room and is all creased, but that's OK. Customers never seem to notice.

I never wear much make-up, so that's not a big problem either. I put on some foundation to cover a few annoying zits and some eye shadow, but I kept it to a minimum.

My hair is not even shoulder length and is dead straight, so I put it in a hair band and a couple of clips and was ready to go.

This took less than half an hour. Walking to work took longer. But at least I'd be on time. In fact, I'd probably be there before Crass and I'd have to wait until he turned up fifteen minutes late looking like a human hangover.

I like walking to work when the weather's nice. Not too hot, not too windy, and definitely no rain. If it rained, I had to wake Dad up, and getting Dad up nowadays was not an easy job.

I walked through Jubilee Park. Only a couple of people walking their dogs and me. The dogs were all excited, straining at their leashes or running maniacally after tennis balls. Dogs are always so happy. Every time I see a dog I wonder why I don't have one. In fact we don't have any pets at all. They've all gone and died, including a couple of cats, a goldfish and a white rabbit called Snow that Mum and Dad bought me for my ninth birthday that lasted about two weeks before it escaped and feasted on snail bait next door. Dad found it stiff as cardboard in the neighbour's rose garden. We buried Snow in the backyard and even now I don't like stepping on her grave near the lemon tree. Somehow I think it's bad luck.

I couldn't handle a pet, anyway. Who'd feed it? Who'd walk it? I do enough. But it'd be nice to have some company on a weeknight when I'm alone in the house. Although that's not so common anymore. Usually Dad's home, watching TV or swearing at the buzzing fridge that has been threatening to blow up for, like, the last two years.

I could hear kids playing cricket somewhere behind the bowls club as I made my way towards Main Street. Saturday is the big shopping day around here and the Rising Sun bakery was pretty full when I walked pass it. Men with the newspaper stuck under their arms were buying coffee and pastries and women loaded loaves of bread into the storage compartment of prams. One mum was trying to coax her son into shutting up by offering him a gingerbread man, but it didn't work. He went on crying and she came out the door with an exasperated look in her eyes. I heard her say, 'You can't have a

meringue worm this early in the morning Damien!’ and he shouted back, ‘I want a worm! I want a worm!’

I wondered what my Mum did when I was a snotty brat? She wouldn’t have put up with it. Primary school teachers are experts at getting kids to behave. I wouldn’t have got a gingerbread man as a bribe, that’s for sure.

My boots were beginning to hurt by the time I reached the store. They’re not great to walk up hill in. I reminded myself to charge my MP3 player so I could listen to some music after work for the walk home tomorrow. I finished early Sunday mornings and Dad had stopped picking me up once Daylight Savings had started. I like the peacefulness of the early morning, but I liked listening to music to unwind at the end of the shift.

The door to the store was opened when I reached it. Right on ten o’clock. Crass was on time for once.

‘Oh well’, I said to myself as I walked in, ‘another day, another dollar.’ That’s an expression I read in a book somewhere that stuck with me. It’s like the motto of the casual student worker who does the stuff nobody else wants to for half the pay. I guess there’s worse ways to spend a Saturday morning.

Boy, was I ever wrong.

## A Strange Return

I pretty much started wishing I was back in bed as soon as Robert Keppler walked into the store. Anything would be better than having to put up with Robert Keppler. He's a seriously weird guy.

I'd had my suspicions when I first met him three months ago. The fifteen minutes he'd just spent taking me scene-by-gruesome-scene through a horror movie called *Night Falls* confirmed it.

He is really, really strange.

I still don't know why he felt the need to tell me everything about a dopey horror that I have absolutely no interest in at all. I'd rather talk about Mexican Walking Fish, and they totally creep me out. I felt like telling Robert to go and tell someone who cares. But I didn't. For some reason I just let him keep talking.

'*Night Falls* was kinda lame in parts, but generally awesome,' Robert said, his tongue flicking between his teeth and his eyes bulging like ice cream tubs. 'It's about this old woman, right? Her name's Matilda. She lives way back in the 1800s in a town named Night Falls. Pretty stupid name for a town, hey? But it *is* a horror movie, you know?'

I tried to smile while at the same time scan in a pile of DVDs. He didn't seem to get the hint that I wanted him to go...away...immediately.

'So this old woman used to pay the local kids for teeth they'd lost, sort of like the tooth fairy, yeah? But then these two kids mysteriously disappear, and the locals freak out and they think she's murdered the kids, so they hang her, right?'

As you do.

'Sounds pretty freaky,' I said, my eyes still on the DVDs I was returning.

I could smell his body sweat from the other side of the counter. It was a bitter, sour aroma, like the smell of my dad's work jumpers in summer. When I wash Dad's work clothes I feel the sweat cling to me for the rest of the day until the following morning's shower. Gross.

Robert's heavy, knee length black coat clung to him tight, like cling film. It was about two sizes too small. And what was with that coat anyway? It was almost summer and I was only wearing a T-shirt.

Everything Robert wore was, in fact, black. His tight jeans with the frayed seams, his faded *Korn* T-shirt and the scuffed Doc Martens with the flapping sole. The worst was his beard, a scraggly thing that didn't seem to know how to grow properly. Patches of it covered up rashes and pimples on his blotchy face. At least he wasn't wearing his hair out this time. It was tied back in a pony tail. If he let it loose, wisps of hair would plaster themselves to his forehead and neck like bits of loose cotton from his T-shirt.

'Pretty freaky?' he said, 'Hell yeah! She's standing in this kid's room! Wouldn't *you* freak if you pulled back your sheets and saw her standing by *your* bed?'

I looked at him and thought I wouldn't freak as much I was freaking out right now. He eventually left. As usual he didn't say thanks or bye, he just suddenly turned and left mid-sentence, mumbling to himself. He talks, but he never talks to you. He never looks you in the eye. It's weird. He definitely has social problems.

Crass laughed from where he was standing in the comedy aisle. I'm glad he found it funny. Robert gives me the creeps. I mean, I'm a fifteen-year-old girl. Horror movies scare me. Grown men who are obsessed with horror movies scare me even more.

I picked up the DVD cover. It had two large hands pressed against a red, burning sky, making it look as if someone was trying to escape from a stained glass bowl. There's no way I'd watch something like this. I'd be sticking with Ben Stiller and Drew Barrymore. At least they made me laugh.

'So, did ya have fun with Robert?' Crass asked as he walked towards the counter.

'Thanks for helping me out there,' I replied. 'I think he's totally strange and you just left me with him the entire time.'

Crass just laughed. 'You know he's rented almost three hundred movies over the past year? A load of them were horror movies.'

'Really? I didn't even know we had that many.'

‘Yeah, I looked at his rental history on the computer. I’m telling ya Stacey, that’s almost one every couple of friggin’ days!’

That made Robert the Video Saloon’s best customer by a mile.

Sighing, I opened the DVD cover of weirdo Rob’s movie to scan and return it. The wrong disc was inside. It was a plain TDK disc with the words: “NIGHT FALLS: MASTER COPY” scribbled in jerky, green marker pen.

‘Crass, look at this.’ I showed him the disc. ‘It’s a copy. The original disc is missing. I reckon Robert has burnt the DVD and returned the copy by mistake.’

‘Jeez, he’s an idiot.’

‘You reckon he’s been burning all the movies?’

Crass shrugged, picked up the disc and twirled it around his finger. ‘I’ll give him a call and ask him to return the original. God, what a total friggin’ loser.’

‘I bet he copies all those horror movies so he can watch them a hundred times each,’ I said. ‘He probably memorises the lines.’

Crass took the disc and put it in the top pocket of his shirt. ‘Hey, wouldn’t it be the worst if you were trapped in some old house with Robert?’

The thought made my skin crawl. ‘I’d totally freak.’

I placed the empty *Night Falls* cover to one side and gathered up the rest of the returned videos and DVDs. There weren’t as many as there used to be on a Saturday morning. The new Blockbuster store just out of town was slowly taking all our business since it opened last Christmas. Nobody wants to go to a crummy old movie store when you have a brand new Blockbuster. The Video Saloon had been opened in town for fifteen years or more, but I wondered how much longer it would last. The December summer holidays were coming up and school finished soon. I hoped I still had my part-time job by then. At least the weekends continued to be busy – mainly because of the half-price overnight offers we had. We were pretty busy Saturday afternoons and evenings, which was good. Otherwise I’d have been outta here.

I returned the DVD discs to the shelf in the back of the store. In Blockbuster all the DVDs were kept in their covers on the shelf. Not at the Video Saloon. We didn’t have

any security gates so we had to walk out to the back office and get every disc or video game off the shelf. It took ages.

Crass walked out with me to pick up his large green gym bag from the office. Every Saturday afternoon he spent his lunch hour or two at the local gym. I didn't mind. It was peaceful without him, even when he got back so late I didn't get a proper lunch. At least I didn't have to put up with him playing his hip-hop music over the stereo system and I could even watch the odd romantic comedy when the store was really slow.

'Catch you later, dude. Hey, maybe Robert will come back to keep you company,' laughed Crass as he walked out of the store.

I cleaned some shelves and stood watching a preview disc of a kid's film about superheroes training robots to fight in a gladiator's ring. I couldn't really make much sense out of it. Topps arrived soon after. He often dropped in on a Saturday afternoon when he knew the coast was clear. With Crass gone we could talk in peace.

Before Topps could even give me a wave a customer walked in wearing plaster-splattered overalls and smelling of sawdust. I put on my best friendly, welcoming smile. 'Can I help you?'

'Yeah, hi. Colin, the young guy who works here, said he a package for me. I'm a bit early, I think, to pick it up...'

I looked at him blankly. Crass (Colin Sass was his real name, though nobody called him that) said nothing to me at all about having a package waiting for this guy.

'Don't worry, I can come back,' he said when he realised I didn't know what he was talking about. 'While I'm here, though,' he added, 'my son reserved the cardboard cut-out of Jim Carrey you had in the window a while back. Can I collect it? I have my ute, so I'll grab it now. It'll be easier to carry.'

'Did Colin say where he put it?' I couldn't remember seeing a Jim Carrey cut-out anywhere.

'Dunno. Maybe in the back somewhere?'

Jim wasn't out the back. Perhaps down in the basement? That's where most of the cut-outs were kept. I'd been working in The Video Saloon for three months and had only



been down to the basement once. Steps at the back of the office lead down to it. The basement was full of old and broken video covers, shelving, tables, posters and broken recorders. It was dark, dusty and cold. No way would I have volunteered to go down there on a Saturday night by myself.

I looked for Jim, making it extra quick and snappy. It was scary down there. I glanced under the stairs, behind some shelving and tossed a few movie posters around. You'd think with a rubber face like his, Jim would be easy to spot. But he didn't want to be found. 'C'mon Jim, it's your pal Stacey. Where are you?' I whispered.

I made it to the far end of the basement. Nothing. Crass could have put it anywhere.

Towards the corner of the basement sat a forlorn old shelf, empty apart from a couple of dusty video covers. I moved it out the way, trying to avoid the dust heaped on the top shelf, peaked over it, and gasped.

## The Basement

**B**ehind the broken shelf was a Laminex table. On the table were five large stacks of DVDs. There must have been a hundred discs – perhaps more. Next to the DVDs lay a pile of glossy colour-copied covers of movies, most of which had not even been released on DVD yet. Some, including one with Tom Hanks and another with Charlize Theron, weren't even in the cinemas in Australia as far as I knew! A list of labels with addresses lay on top of postal envelopes on the ground. Unopened plastic boxes of blank DVD discs were stored neatly under the table.

On the other side of the table lay a handful of console game discs next to a pile of clear plastic covers and photocopied covers. I recognised one as a favourite of Topps'.

It looked like a real sneaky little operation. The DVDs and console games were obviously copies. I picked up one of the discs, a film about drag racing in the streets of Los Angeles. It was definitely pirated. Whose were they? My boss Vince was the only one who bothered with anything down here. Crass just threw down empty boxes and the odd poster. And what was with the envelopes and labels?

Kids were always swapping copies of DVDs, music and games at school, but they didn't look like these. They were always downloaded off the Internet or in photocopied covers, bought in Fiji or Bali by older brothers and sisters on holiday. I once saw a *Spiderman* movie on a pirated disc and had to put up with a lady suffering a sneezing fit and the guy holding the camera moving it down to his lap when he reached for popcorn. Then I'd missed the entire ending when a guy stood up in front of the screen and practised what looked like Tai-Chi.

The covers of the DVDs, however, looked like the real thing. I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference from a new overnighter at the Video Saloon and one of these. Someone had put a lot of effort into them.

I took the drag racing DVD and walked back up the stairs. I didn't want to be seen down here.

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