

The Scrapyard Game

Frank's gaze was startled from his phone as the fence rattled in a sudden rush of wind. The cause of the disturbance was obvious enough, but he spent a good while re-checking his surroundings anyway. He liked to think of himself as above the superstitions of the other kids, but he was severely on edge - and his desperation to hide it wasn't doing his nerves any favours.

Frank was leaning on a clear, stable spot at the corner, but most of the fence had deteriorated over the years. Parts of it were tangled with plant life, others had been cut away in forced entries, and one section had been flattened by a fallen tree, putting the barbed wire on top much too close to the ground for comfort. Within lay the remains of the scrapyard. Amongst the messy weeds were strewn mouldering cars in many states of mutilation mixed with mounds of mangled appliances. Frank found he was very conscious of all the loose and broken metal, the warped edges and jagged protrusions.

Looming over it all was the great square shape of the warehouse. Two large garage-style doors sat on either end of the front, firmly closed and likely rusted shut – Frank had a hard time picturing them ever having moved at all. There was a smaller door between them and another on the back left corner. These both hung ajar, but in the dim overcast, nothing could be seen inside. Windows lined the walls above the doors but were all thoroughly shrouded with grime. Patches of ivy had made poor attempts to snake their way up the walls, finding little purchase on the corrugated panels. The plant had been considerably more successful, however, in covering the little office building nearer the gate.

This structure's faded white paint had mostly crumbled away, revealing grey-browns in the brickwork beneath. Its front door had fallen completely off the frame and its windows were smashed providing a view of the bare, dusty interior. The sign above had lost enough of its coating that it took some imagination to read the words. It identified the place as Holdt's Auto Salvage and had been outdated even while the yard was open, operations having expanded beyond the realm of automobiles. The actual title was of little interest to the kids in town, who knew it better as Ricky Rust's.

Just as Frank was satisfied with his surveillance, he was taken off guard by another noise, this time from the treeline some distance to his right. Something had shifted the underbrush. His eyes made a few sweeps back and forth in a panicked search for the source of the sound before he faintly caught another - something like shushing. It took him only a moment's thought to realize what was happening and return his attention to his phone. He heard movement a few more times but pretended to pay it no mind. There was a brief silence, then Craig sprang from the bushes at a sprint, shrieking, waving his arms and hoping to scare an unsuspecting Frank. Having suspected this, Frank whirled round and was rewarded with the rapturous meeting of fist and jaw.

Craig was a scrawny little prick who had no real business hanging around with the crowd he did. Shorter than Frank despite being two years older, lacking brains, brawn, and coordination, and managing an unfailingly petulant attitude despite it all, the only conclusion was that Sebastian's gang kept him around to watch him make an ass of himself. As Craig went reeling to the ground, it took Frank considerable effort not to look too satisfied.

"What the hell!" yipped Craig. "Watch yourself, asshole!"

"Watch myself? Maybe don't go jumping out of bushes if you can't handle the reactions, moron." Frank could no longer subdue his smile.

“Screw you! I’ll wipe that look off your face.” Craig scrambled to his feet while Frank eagerly prepared to knock him back down.

Another voice cut off the scuffle before it could begin, “Easy there Craig, save it for later.” Julian came sauntering out the same way as Craig. “You can get him back once the game begins.”

Much to Frank’s disappointment, that seemed to be exactly what Craig needed. “That’s right. Just wait for the game, I’ll get you good. I’ll mess you right up” he muttered. Frank scoffed in reply.

The boys had nothing more to say to each other, so they all waited quietly. Frank wasn’t too familiar with Julian – a somewhat popular kid from some rich family or other – but he knew that he already couldn’t stand his aura of smarm.

They were joined after a time by Barry and Noah, who strolled down the path in quite the raucous mood. Frank was aware of the rest of them mostly by reputation, but he’d hung around with these two every so often. He couldn’t say he liked them that much, but they were the cool kids and he wanted in. He’d finally talked them into letting him join the crew, but Sebastian insisted on a round of the Scrapyard Game as his condition, and so today, they found themselves at Ricky Rust’s.

The boys were both regular winners in school sporting events. Barry was lean and athletic while Noah was on the bulkier side. They had decided Frank’s name was too old-timey and found it hilarious, so as they approached, he was forced to endure repeated calls of “Ay Frankie” in terrible mafioso accents. They began to descend into more involved teasing, but Frank was able to direct their attention toward Craig’s failed scare, watching with satisfaction as his target sulked.

Sebastian was next to arrive. The other boys were intimidating as a group, but Sebastian was scary all by himself. His face was sharp and ugly - though no-one would dare say so – topped with a shock of unkempt hair. His mouth was in a tight smirk and his eyes carried a detached cruelty. He dressed stylishly, despite his otherwise rough appearance.

“I take it Rory’s late again,” he said without interest.

“Looks like it,” answered Barry.

“When is he not?” added Noah.

Julian spoke up again, his typical smoothness cut with impatience. “Let’s just start without him this time. He’s not much use at seeking anyway.”

Sebastian slumped against the fence, not looking at him. “Rory’s the one who does the chant. If we don’t do it properly, there’s no point. So, unless one of you suddenly has a song in his heart...” there were no volunteers, “we’re waiting on Rory.” Once he was satisfied no-one would argue, Sebastian turned a side-eye glance to Frank. “So – Frank, was it? – I hope you know how the game goes, cause I’m not in the mood to explain. I don’t expect you’ll win, but if you manage not to cry too hard, I might let you stick around.”

“I’m going to win,” Frank shot back, a tad quicker than he meant to. Sebastian’s smile grew some teeth.

The inspiration for the Scrapyard Game, Richard Holdt of Holdt’s Auto Salvage, was by all accounts a joyless old bastard. With the cold treatment he gave most people - especially his employees – he had few friends, and none of them were close. He never married so he lived on his own quite a distance out of town. If he’d had his way, the scrapyard probably would’ve been much further out

too. No-one was interested enough to suspect him, but neither was anyone surprised when they learned he was a serial killer.

Over 16 years he murdered four women and five children, taking victims from surrounding towns to throw off police. As his business started to decline, it seems he got some bigger ideas, because he moved from killing his targets to collecting them. After spending the better part of year gathering seven young boys, holding them in his wine cellar, he carried out the crime that put Ricky Rust on the map.

On a moody August evening, the scrapyard that had seen so little use of late became the site for a kind of game. Holdt promised the boys that those who played well would be set free and that he would put a bullet in any who didn't. The smallest among them was chosen as the hider and given a head start. Once the boy was a good distance in, Holdt armed the seekers with sharpened scraps and told them that either the hider would die by midnight, or they would, locking the gate behind them.

Holdt honoured his word, and the seekers walked away with their lives, though only they could say if they ever recovered. The police swiftly organised a raid on Holdt's property and found him already dead, having left them pages of demented gloating.

His life had ended, yet Ricky Rust's story continued in the imaginations of the youth. The yard quickly became the subject of fearsome rumour and a common destination for thrill seekers. Those of them lacking in sense and respect soon grew bored with just visiting, and so the Scrapyard Game was born. It was a less dangerous approximation of Holdt's death game played with one hider and any number of seekers. To win, the hider simply had to go however long was agreed without each of the seekers tagging them. This was satisfactory for most, but there were always those with a greater appetite for the macabre.

A harsher variant of the game was devised, though it was rarely played before Sebastian's gang discovered it - few had the stomach. The first difference was that the spirit of Ricky Rust was invoked before each game to allegedly punish anyone who chickened out. The second difference was that the seekers wielded bits of metal and tagged the hider with a jab or a cut. In recent years, it had become Sebastian's favourite tool of torment. It was best played at night, but mercifully for his participants, Sebastian couldn't be bothered with the walk that late and held his games in the day. He had an array of methods to reel in hidere: bets and dares, ransomed possessions, even straightforward threats to hurt them worse if they refused.

Frank wasn't their typical target - he'd seen his fair share of fights - but he was still younger than all of them. If Sebastian wanted him to play the game, it suggested that the offer to join them was merely bait. To them, he was a little chump. That's why he wasn't just going to win, he was going to give the seekers something to think about - get them all at least as good as they got him. If they didn't want to take him seriously, he would make them.

Rory took his time getting there, oblivious of how long he'd kept them waiting. He was in a strange state of giddy excitement, which for all Frank knew, could have been normal for him. Rory was the real occult enthusiast of the group - the others liked Ricky Rust's game, but Rory liked his mythos. He was an odd fit with the rest of them, perhaps not quite so much as Craig. He was tall and gangly, growing his hair down to his shoulders and often drifting around with his mind elsewhere. Everyone thought he was on something, but no one could agree what. The other boys barely had time to yell at him before Sebastian ordered everyone to action. They made their way into the yard.

Taking them to a spot near the middle, Rory fetched a large sheet of metal and a smaller, edged piece. He laid the sheet flat on the ground, then used his makeshift implement to carve in a mark like a pentacle but with a six-sided star. The low screech of metal on metal set Frank's teeth on edge as Rory worked, finishing the shape and scratching Frank's initials into the middle section. When this was done, Rory produced a box of matches and began lighting and placing matches along the lines so that there was a flame at each corner. In the end, the place did look the part of a ritual site.

"Okay, I know I normally do the chant now," Rory began carefully. "But I've found some new steps I want to try."

Julian was unimpressed "You 'found' new steps to the Scrapyard Game?"

"First you show up late and now you want to make us wait even longer." quipped Barry.

"Shut up." Sebastian gave the boys an icy look before recovering his grin. "I like the sound of that. Nothing but the best for our new friend here." Frank bristled at the condescension in his tone.

Rory grew more animated. "Okay, so first everyone but the new guy has to stand at their point of the star. Next, I need everyone to take your weapons-" the seekers had all collected their own strips of metal while they waited on Rory's ritual "-and make a cut on your finger. Then you mark the section with your initials."

"No way! He's the one supposed to be getting cut!" Craig jabbed a finger in Frank's direction.

"Grow a pair, wuss," jeered Sebastian. "You'll do what he says, or I'll do it for you." Craig could only glare at Frank who made sure to return him a cocky smile.

The other boys had their complaints as well, but they all went through with Rory's instruction. He then went round the circle, passing out matches. With their faces lit from below, for an effect that didn't quite work, Rory began his chant.

Ricky Rust, arise once more

For we've a night of fun in store.

Ricky Rust, we call on you

To make us all see this game through.

Ricky Rust, if we should run

May you see that our days are done.

Now it's begun, there's no escape

It's time to stab and time to scrape

Skin from flesh and blood from veins

Screams from lungs and joy from pain.

Frank had, in the back of his mind, appreciated that there was a certain gravitas to the proceedings, but that quickly dissipated once Rory started speaking; the boy had no talent for oration and wasn't helped by the fact their 'night of fun' was actually an afternoon. Frank noticed the others also looked either amused or annoyed by the whole song and dance, except for Sebastian - though Frank imagined that not even he believed in any of this supernatural stuff, only taking it seriously because

he liked how it spooked their victims. However, the atmosphere changed again with the last four lines. There was a rush of something in the air and the matches all burned out at once. It didn't feel entirely like wind, but there was a definite sense of cold. Silence had fallen in the scrapyard.

Julian was the first to speak again "So, these new additions, where exactly did you 'find' them." All at once, he seemed to have recovered his smugness.

The other boys also began to pester him for answers. Rory was hesitant but caved under the mounting pressure. His response was a quiet little stammer. "I, you know, I had, there was this one night where I had this dream—" He was met with an immediate burst of laughter from the group, even Sebastian.

"It was revealed to me in a dream." mocked Noah in a melodramatic, wizened voice.

At this, Frank couldn't help but join them, but the sound brought Sebastian's attention back to him. "Right," he said flatly. "You're still here. Okay boys, time to do what we came here to do. You—" He pointed to Frank "-have a two-minute head start. Then we've got twenty minutes to catch you, but come to think of it, since you're so confident, I'm sure you'll have no problem lasting a whole half-hour, right?" Craig couldn't hide his brief shock. He tried to recover with the best scowl he could muster but this only further amused the older boy. Sebastian pulled out his phone and began idly twiddling with it. "Great. Now that that's settled, your time starts..." he paused long enough to be thoroughly annoying, wearing a cocky grin all the while, "now."

Frank shot off in the most winding route he could think of. As the chatter faded from earshot, he could make out the subject shifting back to taunting Rory.

He headed for the area on the other side of the warehouse where his movement would be fully obscured. He looked through the door as he passed. The thick shadow inside made for an appealing hiding place, but he preferred to leave himself more room to manoeuvre. Once he was round the corner and out of sight, he was pleased to find a wide cluster of mostly intact cars which would provide him plenty of cover. He wandered into the midst of the wrecks, taking note of all the ways to weave through and around them, empty door frames to jump through, seats to climb over, raised undercarriages to crawl beneath.

The distant but approaching noise of the other boys signalled that his prep-time was up. He'd found his intended hiding spot, but he needed a weapon of his own for when he turned the tables on his pursuers. Scanning his surroundings, he found nothing in immediate reach. He began to search more urgently and when he still couldn't find anything, his efforts grew yet more urgent, taking longer than he'd like, extending further than he'd like. Everything was too big, too small, or too firmly attached. He finally spotted something, a thin, flexible metal rod, perhaps part of an aerial. There was no heft to it, but it made a satisfying woosh when he gave it a cursory swing. It would do.

Casting frantic glances about him, he couldn't see anyone yet. All the same, he rushed toward his chosen refuge, losing track of his footing in his haste. Something snapped underfoot, and Frank barely managed not to stumble to the ground. More important, however, was the resounding crack it had made and the sounds of pursuit it was bringing his way. Frank sprinted to the minivan he'd picked out and scrambled underneath. It was a noisier, more difficult process than he'd have liked, but he made it in with time to spare and waited expectantly.

He spotted Craig first, tearing about like a toddler in church. Apparently, he was quite serious about getting back at Frank. He was followed by Noah and Barry, as usual, was close by. Both were much

more casual about proceedings, falling to a leisurely pace upon reaching Frank's set of wrecks and exchanging surreptitious snickers at their little companion's antics.

For a time, Frank felt quite comfortable watching their fruitless efforts from his little nook. He might have been able to keep his position for longer than he did, if not for a mounting anxiety of potentially getting boxed in, plus, there were a few too many beetles for his liking. He had also been unsettled by the sensation of eyes on him, despite a survey of the surroundings confirming no-one could have seen him.

He chose an unfortunate moment to relocate. As soon as he'd squeezed himself out, he became aware of footsteps headed his way. He quickly dove for cover, curling up as small as he could, and thankfully they passed him by. Again, there came the feeling of being watched, but, looking around in fright, Frank saw he was totally alone. Picked himself up and resenting that he'd been made to cower, he skulked to the next car over.

As he moved from place to place, Frank noticed that the weather was different somehow. The clouds looked much the same in their murky greys, but something about them must have changed, because the daylight now seemed drained of colour and the shadows had grown long and strange. The other boys too had taken on a new demeanour. Craig's mad dashing had calmed, Barry and Noah's chatter had faded; now they searched with uniform focus. They would still giggle every so often, despite none of them making any jokes.

Remaining hidden became much harder. The seekers were more thorough and acted less predictably, randomly striking at wrecks as they passed or wheeling round without warning, startling Frank despite himself. Between this unusual silence and the stifling gloom that had settled, Frank's confidence was all but gone - with every close call, he grew jumpier. None of this was helped by the intermittent sense of observation that would inevitably have come from nowhere. He gripped his weapon uncomfortably tight, almost wishing to be found; a clear-cut confrontation would end this uncertainty, at least.

Finally, the older trio moved on. Frank made sure to watch them leave, waiting as they drew into the distance before he relaxed. Tired of being on the move, he decided to look for another, more permanent hiding spot. As he got to his feet, he once again felt the gaze of an unseen observer. By this point, the feeling had gone from alarming to annoying, so when he turned round to see Rory staring at him over the hood of a nearby car, the surprise was so intense that he couldn't help but yelp, backing into the wreck he'd just been using for cover.

His expression was disturbing: an exhilarated grin, but with an odd distance to it. The length of metal he held made for a particularly fierce armament - chipped in such a way as to come to a keen point, with natural serrations. Frank expected him to come lunging forward, but he didn't move at all, he didn't even blink. Filled as he was with profound unease, Frank also couldn't bring himself to move, so there the two remained for what felt like an eternity. It eventually occurred to Frank how ridiculous this situation was, and he recovered his nerve. He took a tentative step to the side.

It was now that Rory pounced, his face at once alight with triumph. He vaulted over the car, aiming a savage thrust with his weapon. Frank scrambled aside and the crude blade screeched into the wreckage right where his neck had just been. In a flare of righteous anger, Frank forgot the game entirely.

"What's your bloody damage!?" He swung at Rory, his weapon whipping a long scratch into the boy's forearm. "That could have killed me!"

Rory was silent, returning a swing of his own. Frank managed to jump back and kicked him hard in the side of the leg. As the older boy crumpled to his knees, Frank danced around the side of him, delivering several more strikes.

“Are you listening to me? You,” A graze on the cheekbone, “Are out,” One down across the lips, “Of line!” One on the back of the neck.

The older boy, still seemingly unfazed, reared back to take another jab. Frank threw down his weapon in frustration and levelled a wild haymaker at him. Rory’s nose crunched sharply as the punch connected. The impact was enough to throw his attack off course, but not enough to stop it. The weapon’s ragged edge raked across Frank’s side, and he was momentarily overcome by the pain of it.

With a scream, he staggered against a nearby scrap heap, both hands clutched against his side. He hesitantly lifted a hand from the wound; it had a generous red covering.

“Alright, fine! You got me!” He glared back as Rory rose unsteadily. “You got me, you goddamn psycho.”

For a moment Rory was still, then he whirled round to take another swipe. It was a weak effort. Frank easily dodged and Rory stooped to his knees again, but the sheer enthusiasm of it was enough to leave Frank rattled. Rory’s breath was heavy, blood dripped from his broken nose to mingle with a string of drool dangling from his mouth. Despite everything, he was still wearing his smile. Frank was gripped with fresh terror, perhaps he’d underestimated their intentions for him.

There was a shout from somewhere close. He caught sight of Craig pointing in his direction, calling on the others. Barry was close behind and in the distance was Sebastian approaching at a sprint. Frank wavered, struggling for a moment to find his feet before launching into an awkward run, every other step sending a sting through his side. He leapt over obstacles and careened round turns, making every effort to lose his pursuers, but he couldn’t tell if he was gaining any real distance; the noise of the seekers seemed to come from all around. He quickly grew disoriented in his erratic course through the yard, and without meaning to, came to the office building. As he’d disregarded it earlier, he had no idea of its layout, and decided to pass it by.

When Julian then came charging from the empty doorway, weapon aloft, Frank was too stunned to register it until the very last second. He leapt back narrowly, and the incoming stab grazed over his chest. The seeker readied another attack, but Frank caught his arm and tried to wrest his weapon from him. Their struggle over the jagged scrap pushed Julian against the building’s wall. Frank had taken the initiative, but Julian was steadily regaining the upper hand. Frank was panicked, conscious that the others would be on their way but not daring to divide his attention. Julian stared at him unblinking, his face carrying the same deranged excitement as Rory’s.

In desperation, Frank did the only thing he could think of. He thrust his head forward, smacking against Julian’s and sending it into the hard brick behind it. The seeker’s grip loosened, and Frank was finally able to snatch the weapon away. Julian slumped to the ground and didn’t get back up.

Frank turned to look for the others and was greeted by the sight of Noah rushing him. Hastily raising his weapon, he deflected the swing, only to feel something dig into his shoulder. He withdrew into the doorway and saw Craig moving to join Noah; the little bastard had gotten behind him. They advanced on him carefully, but with a tense energy that made clear they were eager to pounce. Craig made a few short jabs, driving Frank backward while Noah chuckled quietly. Their faces, like

the others, were painted in fevered glee. It struck Frank that they were almost looking through him, as though he were the plastic packaging on a shiny new toy.

Having progressed a good way into the dingy room, he realized that they were trying to corner him. He needed to act before escape became impossible. Attempts to go on the offensive only awarded him more scrapes; he couldn't get close enough to strike before they forced him away. With time running out, Frank prepared something drastic. Calling on the depths of his aggression, he launched his weapon at Noah's head. In the brief confusion that followed, he barged passed Craig – knocking him on his ass – and jumped through the window, wincing as a leftover shard of glass nicked his thigh.

He landed outside with a roll, his new cuts flaring with pain. Springing to his feet, he hurried off as the older boys recovered. With a few quick zigzags and a dive through the husk of something that looked like it had once been expensive, he found himself in a region of quiet. It seemed he had shaken the seekers for now. Edging to a sheltered position behind a set of yellowed refrigerators, he slumped down and sighed a long, hard sigh. The feeling of eyes prickled on his skin and wearily, he looked for the watcher. It was just as well that he found nothing because he didn't think he could have run if he wanted to.

As he caught his breath, his thoughts turned to the injuries he'd been doing his best to ignore. Most of them, he could tell, were minor, but he was concerned about the cut in his side – the others still stung sharply, but that one only hurt now when he moved, in deep searing pulses. He looked down to see a dark stain had spread over his shirt, and he had to peel the fabric away to examine the wound. It was certainly the worst injury he could remember getting, a noticeable gash in his flesh, but Frank realized he had nowhere near enough knowledge to tell exactly how serious it was. He supposed he just had to be happy his organs weren't spilling out. It had re-opened somewhat as he'd exposed it, so rummaging in his pockets, Frank retrieved an unused tissue and plastered it over the wound as a makeshift gauze.

No sooner had he rolled his shirt down than he was startled by a clang ringing out through the scrapyard. There came another impact and another and another. Resounding strikes, just out of rhythm. On carefully peeking around the corner of his cover, Frank spotted Barry a good way in the distance repeatedly hitting a metal sheet with his weapon. His face was manic, and his swings were wild, there was nothing of his usual manner recognizable in him now. He threw back his head and bellowed inarticulately at the top of his lungs "Frankiiiiieeee!"

Overwhelmed, Frank immediately ducked back around. Something was very wrong here. This wasn't the other boys messing with him, or even trying to rough him up – in fact, he doubted he was even dealing with the other boys at all anymore. Whatever Rory had done had worked. The time when he could roll his eyes at whispers of the scrapyard's evil seemed so far away now. He was immersed in a giddy dread he'd never thought to entertain, and his every instinct demanded that he flee. Getting to a crouched position, he scuttled toward the next junk pile over, prepared to look for an escape route, but was interrupted by Sebastian jumping into view and delivering a slash along his arm.

Frank fell back with a scream, and Sebastian levelled another swing. He raised his other arm to defend, taking another cut. The seeker's weapon was thankfully quite straight, which limited the damage, but it still hurt like hell. He kicked at Sebastian's ankles to no avail as his attacker moved to straddle him and aimed a stab at his face. Frank caught the weapon in one hand, diverting it, but scratching up his palm in the process. His other hand grasped in panic for anything with which to fight back. His fingers closed around a decently sized rock, and he drove it into Sebastian's gut. The

older boy doubled over, allowing Frank to wrestle free, only to spot the others headed towards them.

He took off in the opposite direction, only distantly aware of the sounds around him through his own breath in his ears and his own pulse echoing through his skull. Picking up speed, he could feel his legs straining as force surged through them. His eyes darted back and forth, but luckily there was no-one ahead of him, he only had to worry about those behind. Noticing a particularly messy section of the yard, he changed course in hopes of better cover for his retreat.

Heaps of clutter abounded here, spilling onto the ground all about. The footing was treacherous. Frank stooped and stumbled atop the carpet of junk and yanked himself over larger mounds – it was a bitter struggle to maintain any measure of speed. He could only wince as his calves and wrists repeatedly caught on errant edges, for the commotion of movement was always close behind him. As he scrambled down after cresting a particularly precarious scrap-pile, there came a great, grinding crunch followed by further sounds of struggle. Presumably, his pursuers had met with some mishap or other, but Frank was too scared to turn around and check. Instead, he raced back to more steady ground and tried to gain as much distance as possible. Fatigue eventually brought him to a stop, and he hunkered down for another rest.

What parts of him didn't burn from laceration ached with exertion. For a while, he simply closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Much to his relief, the others sounded like they were a good way off. Once he was ready to continue, he immediately began the search for an exit. His current refuge had a much better view than the last, so he soon set eyes on a section of fence that had been crudely pulled apart. He was hesitant to get moving, checking every angle twice, but there was no ambush waiting for him this time.

Frank doubted he had the strength for much more running and thus proceeded with utmost stealth, ever mindful of the seekers' positions. His progress was slow, but he was gradually nearing his destination. Just as he made it tantalizingly close, the words of Rory's rhyme echoed in his mind.

Ricky Rust if we should run

May you see that our days are done.

He stopped, suddenly unsure of himself. It only made sense to get out of there and yet, if this was really happening, if the game did have some power, then running might be even worse. Once again, he felt a hidden someone watching him, but he didn't bother to look for them this time. With his consideration of the supernatural, the sensation chilled him and turned his thoughts to distressing possibilities. His chosen exit, once representing hope, had taken on an ominous air.

Frank didn't get the time he'd have liked for his decision. "Here!" screamed Craig, baring down on him from the other direction. Against all better judgement, Frank chose the devil he knew and retreated into the yard. The other boys were quickly converging on him, limiting his options. He noticed the door to the warehouse in the distance ahead of him and made a beeline for it – the building was his best chance now.

As he passed the threshold, he turned on his heels and, in a painful surge of effort, pulled the door shut. With a thin length of pipe that was fortunately close at hand, he barred the handle right on time for the seekers to arrive. They pulled violently from the other side, and he could already hear his barricade straining. It wouldn't give him much time, but it was better than nothing. Rows of shelves filled the warehouse, they might have been piled high with parts at one point, but now many lay bare, though the lowest remained relatively cluttered. Clouds of dust danced through the air,

prompting Frank to pull his shirt collar over his mouth. All but the most measured movements reverberated in the expanse of the room, so Frank dropped low crawled carefully along. An awful metallic wailing and a resounding snap signalled that the seekers had broken through, and Frank held his breath as they entered.

Four boys came in from the previously blocked entrance and fanned out across the room. Soon after the other two entered through the side door. They must have anticipated he might try to slip out that way, but Frank had no more energy for that kind of retreat. The seekers moved steadily now, gazing lazily over the shelves. They all knew the chase was nearing its end.

The seconds stretched. Frank was wracked with tension. He had to make sure not to move too fast to remain inaudible, but the long sightlines here made it risky to keep any position too long, forcing him to stay on the move. As though sensing his distress, the seekers revelled in their hunt, their laughter rose in volume, and they began to trail their weapons along the shelves beside them. The implements clacked as they bounced off frames and screeched as they dragged across surfaces. At first this only terrified Frank further, but he soon realized the sounds might provide him some cover. During these noises, he could afford to be more reckless, clambering through the empty spaces on shelves and darting down aisles. One by one, he snuck by the other boys.

Once he'd managed to position himself past all the seekers, he decided to take the course they'd first expected and slip out the side door. Keeping each of the others in sight, he crept steadily nearer. There were just a few more aisles between him and freedom, but Frank's excitement finally got the better of him. As he tried to slip through a section of shelf that wasn't quite bare enough, he lost his balance, knocking into the remains of an engine and sending it to the floor with great thunk. In surprise, he straightened up while still halfway through, bumping his head on the surface above and tripping over himself. The seekers sped toward him as he awkwardly rushed to pick himself up. He made a frantic sprint for the exit, tearing up in frustration. He had come too far now; it couldn't all be ruined by this one mistake. Why had he been so utterly stupid? Why couldn't he have kept it up just that little bit longer?

As he made the final turn toward safety, he was intercepted by Barry who barrelled into him, taking him into the wall and pinning him. Frank would have made a poor match for Barry at the best of times, but he was all but out of fight now. Though he kicked and scratched and spat, he couldn't shift the older boy. Barry, for his part, made no attempt to strike at Frank, merely holding him in place with a broad smile on his lips. The other seekers closed in, and Frank could struggle no longer.

All at once, Barry relented, his arms dropping to his sides. Frank, having accepted his end, stared in bewilderment. The other boys also slowed, falling still and silent. A dreamy blankness washed the glee from each of their faces in turn. They turned past Frank to the door and ambled out. He became aware of a faint mechanical buzzing from somewhere close – Sebastian's direction. Understanding hit him suddenly, it was the phone alarm that signalled time was up. A weak sound escaped him, somewhere between a laugh and a sob. Spent, he slid to a heap on the floor and stayed there. As the seekers left, he thought he heard a final, heavier set of feet join them, but he lacked the presence of mind to care. It was a while yet before he was able to rise to his feet. He torturously pulled himself up, and started his long, limping journey home.

Frank staggered heavily through the door and slumped against the wall. The house was dark, but pale light pooled at the end of the hallway, drifting in from the living room. He shut the door and made his way down the hall. The TV was on, showing a menu of some kind. His dad snored loudly from across the room, slumped in his chair, the edges of his features catching the glow. Crumpled

cans and other detritus littered the room, recalling images of the day's horrors. Frank stood in the doorway for a long time. He couldn't remember the last time he'd bothered to ask his dad for anything, but he so desperately wanted to wake him now and tell him what had happened, filled with the childish hope that somehow, he could make everything alright. Eventually, he came to his senses and turned to leave. The best he could expect from his dad would be blank disdain, more likely he would get something thrown at him.

Feeling his way up the stairs and to his room, he collapsed onto the bed, not bothering to change. He lay there, tired, and sore, but too burdened by thought to sleep. He'd won the game, but that meant the seekers had lost. If the stakes were so real for him, then what about them? Would they have to face some kind of penalty? The night crawled on.

Frank gave himself a long weekend, staying home on Thursday and Friday. Not only did he need nurse his wounds, but he also wanted to avoid Sebastian's gang and any other reason he might find to think about his ordeal. His dad, true to form, remained entirely unaware of his son's activities. He spent much of his time idly browsing the web and watching shows. Normally the content would be of a grim and violent kind, but he found himself searching for things that were lighter and more joyful, at one point even checking out a documentary or two. He also spent some hours wondering how he could discretely get tested for tetanus.

A sense of doom hung over him those first few days, he was terrified to face the outside world for what he might hear, but as the days progressed his fear gave way to agitation. By the Monday, he had grown tired of his isolation and tired of living in dread. He was recovered enough now, he thought, to brave anything that might be thrown at him. He even felt able to face Sebastian - he'd beaten his game, after all, with all the odds against him. It occurred to him later, that he never had been much of a thinker.

It turned out Frank wasn't the only one who'd been missing from school: no-one who'd played the game had been seen since. Their disappearance and the ongoing search for them was all anyone could talk about. For all his bravado, Frank tended to go unnoticed by his peers. Often a source of frustration for him, he was glad of it in this case - it meant no-one had made a connection between him and the others. Not wanting to draw undue attention, he gritted his teeth, kept his head down and stayed on the periphery of the conversation. Fortunately for Frank, he only had to endure one day of speculative rumours, unfortunately for him, this was because the seekers' bodies were found that night.

The police had tried to keep the results of their investigation quiet, but the secret proved too much for some of those involved. By early the next morning, the details had spread across the whole town. Frank tried his best to stay ignorant, but the gossip was lurid, and it was everywhere. After exhausting other options, the search had turned to Ricky Rust's old house, long abandoned, and the boys had been discovered in the cellar, all dead with faces frozen in horror. The bodies were entirely intact; some sported minor cuts and bruises, but nothing that looked life threatening, and investigators were unable to find any conclusive signs of poisoning, strangulation, or the like. There were however some bizarre textures beneath the skin and impeded mobility in the joints, which were initially suggested to be due to unusual bone breakages.

The cause of death was quickly determined in the post-mortems, but many further questions were raised in the process, the answers to which, it was decided, were best not pursued too hard. As the coroner put it, the boys had all been killed by 'foreign body vascular occlusion'; as Frank's classmates put it, there were shards of metal found laced throughout their insides.