

writenow! competition 2009

Year 8 – Runner Up
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Story starter by Garth Nix

There Were No Witnesses

I was just getting off the bus when an old guy with a waist-length white beard burst out of the newsagency and ran towards me, shouting, "At last! The saviour of the world, you have arrived!"

I kept walking and pretended I hadn't seen him, even when he lay down on the footpath behind me and started calling out "All hail to the great one!"

A quick backwards glance confirmed that in addition to the long white fake beard, he was also wearing a kind of orange jumpsuit with a zip up the front, yellow gumboots and a New York Yankees baseball cap that was about four sizes too small.

"That's your dad, isn't it?" whispered my best friend Ellen. "In disguise?"

"Nope," I said. "Never seen him before."

I hoped nobody else would recognise him. It wasn't much of a hope, since my equal best-friend Roger, known as Rabbit, added, "What's your dad dressed up like that for? Has he gone crazy?"

“No, he hasn't gone crazy,” I hissed through my clenched teeth.

“He's got a good reason.”

He did too, but it was incredibly top secret. So amazingly top secret that I couldn't even tell my two very best friends in the whole wide world.

Not if I wanted them to stay alive.

Rabbit, Ellen and I decided to avoid my dad and as we continued towards home, I sank deeper into my pool of embarrassment and despair, thinking about how it had started.

It began about a month ago when Dad came home in his suit and tie, with a distant, faded look in his sky blue eyes. He didn't seem down to Earth. He was a dreamy sort of person, but this time it was different. I asked him if he was okay, but he didn't answer. I wondered what the cause was – it wasn't the anniversary of Mum's death. After her death, for a while, Dad became sad and very protective of me. What worried me was that he seemed lonely and frightened.

The next morning, when I got up, Dad was once again in his suit and tie, but with orange bits of fabric sticking out the bottom. I didn't ask but again pondered what was going on. He looked a little more realistic today. As I had breakfast he came over and kissed me and said he had a meeting to go to for a week. As he walked out the door and looked back I was startled to see something I had never seen before lurking in his eyes – a secret. Then he was gone, leaving me with only my baffled thoughts for company.

Walking home from school that day with Ellen and Rabbit, my phone buzzed, signalling that a text had arrived. I looked at the screen – Dad. “**Café Slouch.**

4.30. Dad.” That was all.

It was four o'clock, so I had only a couple of minutes to meet Dad at the rarely visited café. I waved goodbye to my friends, hurried home and changed, grabbed my bike and set off for the other side of town. When I arrived, the bell tinkled, causing Dad to look up nervously. When I sat down, Dad opened his mouth. “For Ellen and Roger, and everybody else to stay alive, you must keep this secret.” Dad then frowned; he was choosing his words carefully. “Recently I found your mother’s notes on an invention she had created. She found out a way to fuel cars without using petrol. When I found the notes, a day later I received an email containing a threat. Anyone who finds out will be killed.”

Suddenly I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach, as I realised that Mum’s death two years ago hadn’t been an accident. Dad continued, “Since she discovered that, all the major oil, petrol and car companies have been going downhill. My stories in the newspaper have stopped being published. By acting in the way I do, like I am emotionally unstable, I thought, would keep people thinking that I wasn’t good at my job, I would be discredited. In doing that, I assumed I would keep us all safe, including you. I thought it would throw them off the scent. When Mum died, I didn’t find the notes until recently. I had no idea she was working on this.” He took a deep

breath. "The people who killed her never found her notes. I found her notes in a safe in the back of our wardrobe."

Dad pulled out his laptop and opened an email which he showed me.

We know about your wife and her intentions. We know that you have found the notes. Anyone who finds out will die.

Mum was an inventor and worked for a small private company- 'Inventions of the Future' until one day, the police found her body by the main street. They assumed she had been hit by a car. No one was charged and the case closed over time. Dad was a journalist, he was very busy, and stopped working after he was asked to report on Mum's death.

When we got home, I just sat on the couch, my mind running and eyes blurring from tears falling down my face. It was an immense shock.

Two days later, when I was walking home with Rabbit and Ellen, I glanced over to the west, towards the cemetery where Mum had been buried two years ago.

When I turned into my street, there were police cars outside my house. I ran. When I had pushed through the crowds, I saw Dad's body and broke down in a sobbing wreck, on Ellen's shoulder.

A while later, a policewoman came over and told us that it appeared that Dad had been hit by a car. There were no witnesses. Dad had done his best to save my life and maybe he had.