

**DEAD
HAPPY**

DEAD HAPPY

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For DRD

A Rock the Boat Book

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THE TEN

Lucy and Raheem
Li and Sam
Jing and Matthew
Rachel and Jamie
Eleanor and Sebastian



HOTMUTHAFKER14

I used to like video games.

Dad bought me a PlayStation when I was fourteen. It was second-hand, but I didn't tell anyone that.

All the other boys in my year played Fortnite. They would join these 'squads' and play together. At first, I thought they all went to each other's houses and sat round the TV in a group, which sounded horrific. But then I found out they *didn't* do that. They were doing it in their own bedrooms. Separately.

And I remember thinking I could probably make friends if I could sit in my room, alone. That sounded ... much easier than making friends in real life. So I told Dad that and he got me the PlayStation.

I practised doing the solo games. Then, after weeks of practice, I was ready to join a squad. I thought I was good enough. I also thought, *I can be someone else*.

I opened the box with the headset that you talk to the other players through. It had lights that flashed and was covered in camouflage graphics like I was about to crawl into combat in the jungle. As I stood in my bedroom and put it on, readying myself for battle, Mum waved at me from the landing, beaming with hope, *pride*.

Have fun making friends, Seb, she mouthed.

I shut the door and loaded up the game. I chose this banana guy as my avatar. It seemed more robust than the others, what with its thicker skin and all. And it looked so *cool*.

I chose the player name *new-on-here!234*.

Then I had this weird giddy moment and I changed it. I changed the player name to *hotmuthafker14*.

My hands were shaking as I gripped the controller. My banana stood waiting in the load-up lobby, doing a strange little dance with its backpack full of weapons, and my whole body fizzed with the thrill of the unknown.

One by one, other people joined the squad and started talking to me through the headset. They said, ‘Hey, hot motherfucker fourteen, nice to meet you.’

I said, ‘Nice to meet you,’ back. And they laughed.

As the voices of these random fourteen-year-olds (I mean, I assume that’s what they were) called me *dude* and *bro* and said things like *let’s go pow pow some bitches*, something happened.

I felt happy.

It was a little odd at first, sure. Joining a group of (apparent) fourteen-year-olds to try and kill other groups of (apparent) fourteen-year-olds, while disguised as cats and superheroes and bananas with faces, was definitely within the realm of anxiety inducing. It was us, but not us. And we were killing each other. But not.

The whole thing was so far removed from everyday life. It was so much *easier*. Because it was all allowed. It was OK for me to be *hotmuthafker14*. In fact, it was pretty normal.

Normalised Banana Killing.

My parents didn't mind. My sister Lily didn't mind. My friend Shelly minded, but that's Shelly for you. She said I'd turn into a brain-dead zombie with no personality. But I thought the complete opposite was true.

Hotmuthafker14 had a great personality. People liked him. They liked me.

And I got good at it. Really good. At both the game and being liked. After one game, I was named the Ultimate Sniper King by some angry Scottish person called *anonymousbadboi46*, for my skill with the Bolt Action Rifle. I could do head shots and kill in one, which he really appreciated.

I lived in that world for months and months. I made friends through my camo headset and said things like *bro* and *wow, your building skills are sick* to complete strangers. Well, not *complete* strangers. But people I'd never met and probably never would.

I was able to hear people laugh at what I had to say. To hear them tell me I was *cool as shit* and that without me they would've lost the game. That I was the Most Valuable Player. And I agreed with them. I had built myself an armour. An armour of strength, attitude and confidence, all while sitting cross-legged on my bedroom rug at 2 a.m. in my paisley M&S Y-fronts. On a school night too.

Then one day the PlayStation broke. I didn't want Dad to pay for another one, so I lied and told him I didn't like it, and that the other players could be rude and swore a lot. But I really missed it. I missed being in that world where things were different. Weird and potentially very *bad*, but different all the same.

Once it was gone, I understood something. I realised that I didn't like reality very much. It was the first time I could articulate such a thing. That it can be real to not like reality. To not feel comfortable in it. To not feel safe in it. Because in the game, I did.

The game showed me how else I could feel. Powerful and strong and ... *other*. Which was all so new. So exciting. So freeing.

And the comparison made reality so much worse. Because I saw that in reality there are much scarier things than sniper-shooting avatars. There are real people with their opinions. Their ability to look at me, really look at me. Look into my soul and see me. See the truth and then think with their real brains and talk with their real words about what I really am. Or what I'm not.

So what I guess I'm saying is the whole PlayStation experience amounted to a mini existential crisis. When I really thought about what all of this meant, the core of the matter was this:

I, Sebastian Harry Seaton, would prefer to be a cartoon banana.

ONE

DEAD FISH

I can smell dead fish. And blood. Putrid. Metallic. Mingled with salty air.

‘Seb! *Move.*’

Fragments of memory begin to circle. The HappyHead building. Sterile and white. A video playing in the assembly room. The coach. A bitter pill. A blindfold pulled over my eyes.

The ground lurches beneath me. A hand on my shoulder. ‘*Come on...*’

I’m sitting on the floor. Something is moving around me in the darkness. Something wet. Seeping into the fabric of my clothes, my shoes, weighing me down.

‘*What’s the matter with you, Seb? Get up!*’

The voice is loud and comes from right next to me. I open my eyes, but the darkness remains. The elastic of the blindfold cuts into the tops of my ears.

The memories keep coming. A boy. Blistered hands. A bee tattoo.

Suddenly the blindfold is pulled from my head.

Light flickers. On and off. Blazing white. Then back to pitch-black.

‘I—’ My voice tears against my throat. ‘I can’t—’

Creaking. More shouting. Crying.

Hands push my chest, forcing me back. My arms twist, searing with pain.

I’m tied to a pipe jutting out from the wall.

The hands pull at the rope round my wrists. Fingers fumble with a knot. Shaking. Bloody.

‘Guys! It’s getting deeper!’

Blazing white. Pitch-black.

‘Seb, you need to help me here, for God’s sake!’ I focus on a pair of eyes – bloodshot and filled with terror. A trickle of red runs down the side of the girl’s face, over her dirty cheek. I hardly recognise her. Blond hair sodden and filthy. Green hoodie torn.

Eleanor?

She bites down on the rope and pulls with her teeth like an animal. The knot begins to loosen. As it does, I wriggle my arms, pulling them down to free them. My hands slide out, red raw.

‘What the...’

She turns to me, eyes wild. ‘Focus, Seb. *Focus.*’

In the flickering light I see snapshots of rusty walls. A long metal room. Figures steadying themselves, hunched over, half submerged.

Water. Water everywhere. Knee-deep now.

‘It’s filling up,’ she says, breathing heavily. ‘Here.’ She holds out her hand and I take it. ‘We need to help the—’

The ground rocks again and she’s thrown into me, slamming us both into the wall. The air is knocked from my lungs and I buckle forward. As the room tilts, the water

swells and crashes over us. The weight of it forces me down, the burning cold tearing into my brain. For a moment I'm suspended, floating, weightless.

Move. I twist my body and feel for the floor with my feet.
There.

I push myself up, breaking through the surface, inhaling gulps of freezing air.

'Help! Please! Help me!' someone screams. I spin round to see two people crouched by the opposite wall. *I remember them from before. From the facility. The twins.*

Li is pulling at the arms of her sister, whose head is below the waterline, her dyed-blue hair floating above her.

'The knots are too tight!' Li screams. 'Get up, Jing, *please!*'

I thrash towards them. 'Let me try!' I plunge underwater and fumble in the murkiness to find the end of the rope that's tied around her waist. I follow it with my hands and locate the knot, somewhere near her back. Then I dig in my nails and pull until it feels as if they might snap off.

Come on, come on.

The rope loosens and she begins to wriggle free. My lungs pound in my ribcage. *My inhaler. Where is it?*

When I break through the surface, my body doesn't feel like it's my own.

Jing pulls herself up, gasping, and leans back against the wall.

'You're OK. *Breathe.*' Li pushes the hair out of her sister's eyes.

'What the hell is happening?' Jing splutters.

I look behind me and for a moment the light holds for long enough for me to see nine other teenagers, cowering against the metal walls.

The Ten.

‘Is everyone free?’ a voice booms out. Man-Bun Boy – Sam. His eyes dart around the group, counting. Then he nods.

My brain throbs. Voices enter it from around me, words struggling to find meaning.

‘How do we get out?’

‘Everyone, just take a second. This is clearly a challenge. We need to think.’

‘Search the walls – there must be a door.’

I run my fingers over the coarse rust, fumbling for something, *anything...*

Someone joins me, breathing in shallow sobs.

Lucy. *Lucy. She was always so nice...*

‘Seb,’ she whispers. ‘There’s nothing—’

A bang. More screams. The light above us explodes and sparks fly, showering down over the water.

Darkness. I feel the water swirling round my waist.

‘What now?’ Matthew Parry-Brokingstock. His voice is strained with panic.

Something catches my eye from above. As my eyes adjust, I see the outline of a square of light.

‘Look! Up there!’

‘It’s a hatch,’ I hear Raheem say from somewhere close by.

‘How do we get to it?’ Jing asks.

‘Lift me,’ Ayahuasca Girl – Rachel – shouts and I can just make out her outline wading into the centre of the room.

A hulking figure joins her. Fridge Boy – Jamie. He picks her up, places her on his shoulders and manoeuvres himself under the hatch. ‘This had better work...’

Rachel runs her hands over the ceiling.

‘There! You’ve got it!’ Raheem yells.

She can just about reach. She pushes.

‘Hurry up!’

‘All right! It’s really heavy..’

She struggles, nearly toppling back down into the water.

Then, all of a sudden, the hatch creaks open and a shard of light pours in. She slides it to the side, revealing a square of sky. A gust of wind blows down, whistling around us.

‘Easy now, Rachel.’ Jamie steadies himself as the room tilts again.

‘Give me a push,’ she calls down to him.

He lifts her legs so her head rises up through the square hole.

‘Holy shit!’ Rachel’s voice echoes down to us.

‘What is it?’

Her head reappears. ‘A boat. We’re on a fucking boat.’