

[BIFF]

I was woken by the sound of someone screaming.

My alarm clock read 6:05 am. I'd only had 4 hours sleep. Outside in the street, our neighbour from Number 43, Mrs Rosethorn in bright pink fluorescent lycra tights, was having a panic attack on the footpath. She was taking deep, rasping gasps and shivering like a stranded jellyfish.

"Are you OK Mrs Rosethorn?" I asked. She silently pointed over my shoulder. It registered on me that the screaming was not coming from her: it was coming from the strange shape in the middle of the road. The figure had two black legs, but the top half of its body was covered by a white bag printed with a big red label Baker's Premium Flour.

"He was in... he was in the... I thought he was... was a ghost..."

I gently pulled the bag off its head, releasing a cloud of white flour. The screaming stopped and the thing turned towards me. It was totally white, caked in flour, but there was no mistaking who it was.

"Tom, what's going on?" I whispered: "What did you do with the dummy?"

Mrs Rosethorn was pulling at my pyjama sleeve. "Call the police," she said.

At that moment the garbage truck turned into Pristine Terrace and its mechanical arm began lifting the bins and emptying them into the compactor. It was then I noticed that the bin we had wheeled home from the university last night was lying on its side on the kerb, empty. Mrs Rosethorn clutched my arm even tighter, "I was just off on my morning run, when I heard sneezing. It was coming from that bin outside 49. I opened the lid and up he popped. He let out a banshee scream and nearly scared me to death. Then I screamed. We both screamed. I thought he was going to attack me."

"It's all right, Mrs Rosethorn," I reassured her. "It's just Tom Chan. He must have been taking out the bin and... ah... slipped or something and got his head caught in the bag and the flour made him sneeze..."

Mrs Rosethorn was staring at me as though I was a dangerous lunatic. "I've heard really bad things about you Bethany Piechorowski. My Cheryl told me you bashed someone's brains out at school. And those Chans, who walk around without pants on... You should be ashamed of yourself playing practical jokes on neighbours going about their business. Just wait till I tell your mother!"

And she turned on her heel, ran back up Pristine Terrace and disappeared into Number 43

I was trying to digest what she'd just said about me and Tom when the garbage truck gave a blast of its horn and I turned to see that Tom hadn't moved since I took the bag off his head and he was directly in its path. I pulled him over to the kerb as the truck rumbled past. I patted him down and clouds of flour flew off his clothes. He sneezed. We both sneezed. I saw that beneath the coating of flour, Tom was wearing his school uniform.

“Why are you dressed for school so early? Couldn’t you sleep?” He didn’t answer, but he didn’t put up any resistance either. At his front door, he just stood there. Looking at me.

“Do I have to pick the lock?” I asked.

The door abruptly opened from the inside and Tom and I came face to face with... Tom.

Only this Tom was in pyjamas and he was yawning.

“It’s only a quarter past six. Who’s this? What do you want?”

“No-one is going to believe this,” I said.

Just then I saw Mrs Rosethorn emerge from No. 43 and head back down Pristine Terrace, accompanied by Mr Rosethorn, who was looking very grumpy about being dragged away from his breakfast.

“Quick, let us in!” I pushed the door open and dragged my flour-encrusted companion inside Tom’s house and closed the door.

“You’ll have to sort this out,” I said. “I need to get home before the old bat drags Mum into this.”

“I don’t understand...” stammered Tom, but I think he was starting to catch on. I pulled Pyjamas Tom and dough-boy together, “Tom, meet Tom. Now I have to get back to bed before that woman knocks on our door and wakes up Mum.”

I ran through Tom’s house, out the kitchen door, over the fence, up the drainpipe to my bedroom and under the covers just as our doorbell began to ring.