

LOCKED UP

story by Tim Lehnert | illustrated by Douglas Holgate

I couldn't stand upright, and my back and neck hurt. I was also in darkness, except for the feeble light admitted by thin horizontal slits in the narrow door. I tried to sit, but there wasn't enough room to extend my legs, which had also started to throb. Even worse, my chest was tight, my heart raced and I was beginning to pant. Was I running out of oxygen? I wanted to scream but didn't dare. I could hear murmurings coming from down the hall, and occasionally somebody would walk by. I needed to remain undetected, but I also wanted out.

It felt like I'd been confined for hours, but my phone read 11.42 am. It had only been twenty minutes. I tried to distract myself by focusing on the slivers of light. I realised that if light was coming in, so was air. I wasn't suffocating. I couldn't be. It was no different than being in an elevator or closet. Air was coming in. True, it was gloomy, uncomfortable, and a little smelly, but I was in no immediate danger. Still, I couldn't stay inside forever. At some point, I would need to use the toilet, as well as drink and eat. I decided to take my chances and bang on the door.



Truth is, I'd known what I was getting into ... literally. After third period ended, I saw Alexa and Mr Lloyd walking down the first floor corridor towards me. I didn't want either of them to see me, so I jumped in my locker. I figured I would wait a couple of minutes until they had passed, and then hop out and go to biology class.

My plan unravelled when Ji-Yeon, who has the locker next to mine, noticed that I'd left my lock hanging open. She closed it, thinking she was doing me a favour. I didn't say anything when the lock clicked shut because I'd calculated that Alexa and Mr Lloyd were probably strolling past at just that moment.

Soon, the bell for fourth period rang and the corridor was deserted. I was trapped.

I was avoiding Alexa because of a misunderstanding that had occurred earlier that morning. I didn't know if, when we passed each other in the hallway, she was going to ignore me, punch me or offer me a hug. I thought it best to keep my distance.

As for Mr Lloyd, he'd given me an extension on a report that was due last week. If I got it in today, there would be no penalty for it being late; if I didn't, I'd get a zero grade. Unfortunately, I had barely started. Mr Lloyd is not the type of teacher who ignores you when you cross

paths. It's more like, 'Marco, how are you?' 'Marco, you look like you had a fine weekend!' Today it would have been, 'Marco, nice shirt! Where's my report?' I like Mr Lloyd, but I did not want to bump into him any more than I wanted to see Alexa.

I banged on the inside of the locker door, but nothing happened. I hammered some more. This caught the attention of Ms Marek, the Assistant Principal, who was patrolling the halls. 'Is somebody in there?' she asked.

'Yes, me, Marco.'

'Marco?'

'I'm in Ms Klempa's homeroom.'

'I see. Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' I answered. I'd thought Ms Marek was going to start yelling at me, asking me what the heck I imagined I was doing, saying that she'd heard of some idiotic stunts and so on, but she didn't.

'Don't worry, honey, we'll get you out. Don't panic.' I wished mine was a combination lock; I could have told Ms Marek the numbers and she would have freed me, ending the episode quickly. Unfortunately, it was a key lock, and the key was in my pocket. Ms Marek told me to 'sit tight' (what choice did I have?) while she went to the office. I soon heard her voice over the intercom. 'Mr Hynes to the first floor corridor.' Mr Hynes is the school maintenance





man. Ms Marek returned and we made agonising small talk about whether I had any brothers or sisters, and if I played sports. My answers, in case you're interested: one sister who is in Year 7, and no, I don't play any organised sports, but I do like shooting hoops with my friends.

Mr Hynes showed up a couple of minutes later. He pulled on the lock a couple of times, snorted and left to get his bolt cutters. By this time, Principal Kearns was on the scene. I have never had a proper conversation with Principal Kearns; there's never been any reason for one. It was unfortunate that our first real contact was under these circumstances.

'Did somebody put you in there?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'Don't protect them,' said Ms Marek—head of our school's anti-bullying task force. I was tempted to cast myself as a victim and say that a bunch of rugby players had stuffed me in the locker, but that would have invited further problems.

'Why did you get in there?' asked Principal Kearns.

'For a joke, I guess,' I responded. No way was I telling him about Alexa and Mr Lloyd.

'Doesn't seem like a very funny joke,' said Principal Kearns.

'I guess not,' I answered.

Mr Hynes returned with the bolt cutters. 'This should only take a minute,' he said. By now, fourth period was over and kids were streaming by.

'Nothing to see here,' said Principal Kearns. This was not accurate. When the Principal, the Assistant Principal and a man wielding a pair of bolt cutters are standing in the hallway talking to a kid trapped in a locker, there is something to see, and everybody knows it.

Mr Hynes grabbed the lock with his cutters and on the second try, it broke. I pushed the door open and climbed out. It was hard to stand up straight at first, but I did so, trying to look as natural as I could. A group of kids, including Alexa, were standing about five metres away

along the opposite wall, watching the whole thing. Alexa stared at me as if I were a space alien who had just disembarked from his flying saucer. I gave her a small wave.

'Marco!' she gasped.

'Alexa, great to see you,' I lied.

'Marco, I have something to tell you,' she said, approaching. She had a gentle look in her eyes.

'Sure,' I said. I wondered if perhaps she was going to apologise, or ask that we get together later.

'Mr Lloyd says he wants his report this afternoon.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Thanks.'

Principal Kearns hustled everyone along and told me to follow him to his office. 'Do you need to see the nurse?' he asked while we walked.

'No thanks; I'm good,' I said.

Principal Kearns closed the door to his office. 'Frankly, I don't see the point in a detention or suspension,' he said. 'I think being stuck in a locker is punishment enough.'

'I appreciate that,' I said.

'I do, however, have to call your parents,' he said. 'I need to let them know about this episode, just in case you weren't going to share the details with them.'

'Uh, okay,' I said.

'It's a stupid thing you did,' said Principal Kearns. 'You understand that, right? It's a disruptive waste of time and you're lucky you didn't get hurt.'





'I know,' I said. 'It won't happen again.'

'I hope not,' said Principal Kearns. I left his office and headed to class.

I regretted trying to run away from my problems. Now I had a backache and a neck crick, Principal Kearns was going to call my parents, and I still didn't know where I stood with Alexa or have my report done. I resolved to do two things: first, write as much of the report as I could at lunch and bring it to Mr Lloyd that afternoon; and second, call Alexa and have a proper conversation with her.

After last class, I put the finishing touches on 'Puberty ... Friend, or Foe?' and took it to Mr Lloyd. He flipped it open, skimmed the report

briefly and offered me another day if I needed it. I was pleased with that outcome and took back my masterpiece for further polishing.

I went outside to call Alexa. I was walking across the car park and dialling her number when I saw my mother getting out of her car. What was she doing here? Principal Kearns must have called her.

This meant trouble. Before she could lay eyes on me, I'd scaled the small wall at the rear of the car park and landed on the other side. Just steps away was a dumpster. It was open, and I easily scrambled in and closed the lid. No way was my mum going to see me now. It really stank in there, but I figured all I had to do was wait until she was gone ... ■