

The Trap at Lincoln

They attacked in late May, during his phy-ed class at Lincoln Junior High School, beside the Arkansas river.

Tom Howardson felt fresh and energized, ready to begin the workout. He enjoyed phy-ed. It was the one class where he didn't pretend. He couldn't. His body, although slightly smaller than the other seventh-grade boys, was solid and muscular. It secretly amused him to show off his strength, especially on the ropes challenge.

Tom and another boy faced the two ropes and waited for the whistle. He clambered up the rope without using his legs. The other seventh-graders watched, with open-mouthed amazement, at his easy climb and cheered when he reached the top. Tom, the victor, looked at the young student below struggling to get to the halfway mark. "SHAZAM!" he yelled.

From this vantage point, he saw the two agents, and the assistant principle, enter the far side of the gym. Instantly, Tom knew who they were. They paused by the door, and the assistant principle motioned for Coach, the phy-ed teacher, to join them. During their temporary distraction, Tom plunged down the rope, burning his hands red.

He had three choices: the two gym exits or the locker room exit. Without saying a word, he hustled to the nearest door, into the locker room. As the door closed, he looked back. An agent pointed in his direction and yelled, "Stop!"

Tom ran through the locker room toward the exit. He jumped past two boys huddled in conversation. He nearly collided with another who had abruptly bent forward to tie his sneakers. A last-second dodge, and Tom banged against the lockers as he passed the surprised boy. He slammed against the exit door's push bar with his full weight— and came to a dead-stop.

He groaned in pain as his shoulder took most of the force.

For the first time ever, the exit was locked. He tried to ignore his shoulder pain and stinging hands, and scanned for an escape route. The only other door led to the pool, which would be unused at this time of the day.

In the gym and the locker room, students and staff had been present, limiting the agent's public actions. But an empty pool area would be a perfect place to forcefully abduct him, again.

What waits behind this door?

He ran to Coach's open office and grabbed the desk chair. It had a high metal back and most importantly— wheels.

Tom pushed it through the locker room, toward the ramp leading to the pool door. His palms on the seat, the back of the chair forward like a shield, he crouched, and forced it down the ramp with increasing speed and banged open the door.

They were waiting for him.

A muffled shot echoed as the tranq dart ricocheted off the shielding chair.

Tom shoved the chair toward a surprised agent. He had no time to react before the chair pounded him in the gut.

The agent staggered back, slipped on wet tiles, and plunged backward into the pool. The chair followed, splashing and crashing on top of him— the tiled floor now slippery with water.

Tom lost his footing and skidded to the floor, just in time to avoid another dart shattering the wall tiles above his head.

The shooter stood in the open doorframe of the only emergency exit— the one that Tom had been hoping to use. Two other dark-clothed agents stood beside him, hand-cuffs ready.

Tom recognized one of them— Stephen, the ‘student teacher’ who’d started last week.

That should have been a red flag.

Tom scrambled for a few feet, unable to get traction on the damp tiles. He ran west toward the uninspiring gray door of the maintenance room. It might be a dead-end. Tom ran in anyway, slamming the door behind. He paused while his eyes adjusted to the dim light, his hand on the door knob. Then his finger touched it— the small thumb-knob which he turned to lock the door.

Many round, lighted dials encased in the heating and filtration units delicately illuminated one side the room. But shadows remained at the far end.

The large room wasn’t just for pool maintenance, as he had thought. An old furnace, and hot water tanks lined the dark walls.

Tom frantically scanned the grayness looking for anything that he could use as a weapon. He took a few steps toward the shadows and studied the floor.

It was an access panel— a door in the floor.

Tom slid his hands over the rough metal surface for a few seconds before finding the flush, circular latch handle. He jerked up on the heavy metal floor panel. He stuck a foot into an opened crack of darkness and struggled to lift the thick door until it swung back hitting the wall with a loud clang.

Tom paused for a second to catch his breath.

The room reverberated with the thunderous pounding of agents outside the maintenance door.

A dart of fear paralyzed him.

Get moving! Go, go!

Tom crouched in the darkness, peered into the darker hole and saw a ladder. He jumped down the dark square as he grasped the rungs to halt his plummet. His feet kicked around until they found a footing. With hands and feet pressed on the outside edges of the ladder, he slid into the darkness; distance unknown.

His burning hands gave out and released their grip. Tom fell backward unhindered— fortunately just a few feet— and jarred against a solid floor.

He stood and made a dizzy stumble backward in the blackness.

Tom wavered in the darkness, disoriented, looking for direction.

The agents busted through the maintenance door.

A fuzzy shaft of light from above turned the blackness to a dim gray.

Tom stood in a small, hot utility room lined with strange shadows of mechanical equipment. An empty light socket protruded from the low six-foot ceiling.

The only exit: a narrow cement-walled hallway with pipes and wires lining the ceiling.

I’m a rat running through a maze.

With the light behind him, he ran blindly into the dark corridor with hands extended.

He had no idea how long this corridor might be, until he smashed into something that knocked him to the floor, his head striking hard.

Ears rang as fingers felt for damage. It hurt but wasn't bleeding.
Sitting now, thin light filtered from the corridor's entrance and lit his obstruction: a dark door.

He could see a hairline of light under the door— it led outside!

The G-men had expected him to run into the empty pool room. But, had they known about the access panel in the maintenance room? This corridor may be a cattle shoot, with a big cage outside that door, surrounded by armed agents.

He caught his breath and considered his two simple choices: the certainty of the past or the uncertainty of the future.

He grasped the door knob.

It didn't open. Panic!

This time he intentionally searched for the protruding thumb-turn. Tom turned the lock and pushed, with no effect. He shoved hard, but the door shoved back harder.

A door that doesn't open is as useful as a wall with a door knob. A dead-end. They *had* planned it.

An agent's distant voice cut through the dark, "OK, put that arrogant punk to bed!"

A closer voice came from the utility room, "Ooww! These ceilings are low."

Shuffling feet moved cautiously near the corridor's entrance.

Tom was trapped, hunted by an invisible agent. He was powerless to do anything in the darkness but listen to his pursuer approach. He tried to silence his nervous breathing, and steady himself, when his hand touched a deadbolt latch—

Escape! Run!

No. He argued with himself.

His first instinct was always to run. But if he ran out to the daylight, the agent would just follow close behind. He had to stop this attacker now, or it really would be bedtime.

Fear clamped around his heart.

The shuffling, unseen feet were moving faster, closer.

Think!

Tom remembered a magic illusion which required a flash of light to temporarily blind the audience.

He flipped the deadbolt and pushed.

As he swung the door open wide, Tom closed his eyes to the blinding light of the afternoon. He used the sun as a weapon against his pursuer. He promptly reversed his motion, slammed the door shut and ducked.

From behind, a gun fired and a tranquilizer dart stabbed into the door.

Tom had remained in the corridor and was crouching in front of the door, invisible to the agent.

He reached for the dart, finding it at once, just a few inches above his head. He yanked it out and carefully probed it with his hands like a blind man. It had a long metallic needle, with a micro-canister attached.

Fast footsteps approached the door. Tom remained cowering in the pitch-black until the agent was a step away...

With ferocious force, he swung his hand upward and jammed the sharp metal tip into the

oncoming sound.

“Aaaaah!” was the next sound he heard.

Tom hoped that the dart still had a dose of its venomous drug, otherwise the only result of this effort would be a really pissed-off agent.

Large hands clenched Tom’s small neck and squeezed hard, choking him.

Tom struggled and swung against the unseen, murderous hands. They remained on his throat, fingers digging into his esophagus.

They finally got me...

A familiar voice said, “I’m so glad that I get to— arrgh...”

The agent’s body slumped forward, crumpling on top of Tom, who fell back, forcing the door open, lighting the corridor.

It was Stephen, the way-too-friendly student teacher— with a dart lodged in his chest.

The student pushed the fake teacher’s body off with disgust. He was the cause of this chase! Stephen had pretended to be a friend. But his smiles were a disguise. Tom vowed to never again trust a friendly adult— if he escaped.

Out of rage, Tom kicked Stephen in the gut. The agent didn’t complain.

Tom jumped to his feet and got his bearings in a second. He stood about three quarters of the way down a grassy hill. A narrow gravel path, for an occasional utility truck, gently curved down from the higher parking lot a few hundred yards away. Surprisingly, no sign of agents. They hadn’t planned for this. The thought pleased him.

Two choices: up or down?

A large white van labeled *Child Welfare Services* skidded to a stop in the west upper-parking lot. Four men jumped out and began to descend on Tom.

Nope. Only one choice.

The sloping grass slowed them considerably. One man’s black dress shoes lost traction and he slammed to the ground.

Tom pounded down the hill toward the corner of the building. As he pivoted passed the south corner, he glanced back.

A man pointed a gun at him.

Tom looked forward as an explosion of brick sent pebbly-shards into the side of his neck.

That wasn’t a dart!

For a moment, Tom foolishly thought that he had outsmarted the G-men and that this side of the building was unguarded. And it was, for a reason: behind an eight foot chain-linked fence streamed the Arkansas river. The stunning view that Tom had seen every day from the school cafeteria, became his final barrier.

It’s the end of the maze for the rat.

The long drop to the monstrous, sharp rocks littering the steep ravine would certainly put an end to Tom’s flight— not that the G-men would care. They could still use him, even crippled for life.

Tall leafy trees framed the sides of the dead-gray rocky slope. As he anticipated his capture, a branch of the nearest tree scraped against the window above him.

The high-pitched grating noise reminded him of Mrs. Jackson’s chalk on the board of his fifth-grade classroom. Fifth grade. Before he knew who he was; what he was.

Tom's eyes traced a path along the branch to the crossing limb of another tree, further down the ravine. If he could— Hell, even if he couldn't— it was his last and only choice.

He was seconds from capture.

The safety fence was no problem for Tom. Balancing on it was.

This was the toughest phy-ed workout of his life: Rope Climb, Mad Dash, and a round of Darts. Now he was doing Gymnastics on the high beam. Coach would be proud of him— that is, if Coach didn't think that he was a juvenile-delinquent run-away.

With his left hand on the building, he steadied himself on the fence. The sharp rocks threatened fourteen feet below his head. Even the wind was against him. The ringing in his ears, while balancing atop the fence created the perception that he was spinning and falling. His wobbly legs hardly supported him.

He heard the approaching shouting of his pursuers.

His target swayed in the wind.

He jumped.

Outstretched hands grasped the thin branch.

He hung on the end of a long, narrow limb; not strong enough to support even his light weight. As it began to sag, he pulled himself along; hand over painful-hand.

His body dangled high above the rock-strewn ravine.

His pace was fast, but slowed with each strained stretch of his arms. Every limb ached.

The sound of the gun shot startled him. He almost let go.

The shooter was at the fence, only missing because Tom was a swinging target in a carnival game.

Shoot the monkey and get a prize.

But they were playing for his life. His life.

What right do they have?

Anger boiled up and energized Tom. He finally reached the strong, supportive limb of the next tree.

He moved with greater speed along this sturdier branch.

Tom glanced toward the window of the cafeteria.

Wide-eyed, little faces pressed against the glass. Children pointed and laughed.

Only a dozen feet away were innocence, peace and freedom. They had no idea he was running for his life.

The eighth-grader, Michelle Hanson, in her pretty blue dress, gazed wide-eyed, both palms pressed against the window. No smile. It seemed as if she knew that she'd never see him again.

I'm going to miss her.

Tom reached the next tree; the leafy branches giving him temporary cover. He stepped around the thick trunk, from branch to branch, toward the river. Like a high-wire performer, Tom traversed a sturdy limb until it began to bend from his weight. He stooped, grabbed the branch and swung his body below it, pulling himself farther over the river.

His view now unobstructed, he saw the G-men stopped behind the safety fence— and they could see him.

A man struggled to snip the wires with a large metal cutter.

Oxfords aren't good for climbing.

Tom stared at the flowing water. It seemed as cold and uninviting as death.

He was at the end of his rope.

The cramped muscles of his hands finally gave out.

The second that he let go, another shot rang out.

He flailed his arm to keep upright. His last vision: dozens of young faces with surprised expressions.

Deep breath.

The shock of cold water nearly forced his breath out of him.

His light body didn't plunge far into the water. But he swam deeper, toward the middle of the river. He stayed under water until the threat of breathing in death forced him to the surface. His head popped out of the water and he sucked in great breaths of life.

The cold river current moved faster than he expected.

He saw agents stumbling down the rocky ravine. They were losing their rat. Drowned rat.

He let the river carry him downstream, and away. Away from his school haven of the last nine months. Away from Michelle Hanson. Away to his unforeseeable future.