



Moulded When Moist

by John Travis

Hinkley knew seeing his office widow smashed shouldn't bother him, but it did. Within a week of the school being fenced off and the signs going up the place looked ten times worse; as well as the slate missing from the sloped section of the roof, and the small burnt patches on the grass, the staff-room curtain waved outside its broken window like a nicotine-coloured sash against the pebbledash wall. Suddenly the sun went behind a cloud, but his view wasn't any clearer - still, he didn't suppose he'd need his glasses for anything in particular.

Crunching across the gravel he saw one of the boards covering the broken window had slipped, partially obscuring its graffiti; TO KNOW HOW IT FELT was all he could make out. It reminded him of part of the letter read out at the inquest; he tried to push it from his mind. That was two years ago and you were completely cleared. Nobody else knew you were involved. I was so long ago he could hardly remember a lot of it, one thing of many in his career. Fishing the huge bunch of keys from his jacket, he went to unlock the door but found the lock missing. The school holidays. Only to be expected.

Walking down the short corridor to his office, cracks in the walls glowed as the rays from the skylight touched them. Patches of wall previously covered with posters showed fresher paint. Just before he went inside he noticed a large blob of white paper sticking to the ceiling above him.

The room was basically the same as the last time he'd been, although the mirror on the wall had been smashed, a few broken sections hanging in the frame like icicles. Getting a chair he'd seen in the corridor he put it at his desk, unfastened his briefcase and poured himself a coffee from his flask, letting out a huge sigh as he did so. Despite the ruin of his surroundings this would always be his office. And it was nice to get away from home, away from those damned nuisance calls. After a while he noticed they always rang when lessons should start and end; looking at his watch he saw it was 12:05: one five minutes ago. In the end he had just stopped answering; he didn't want to hear someone gurgling down the line at him like a baby every hour. Then there had been the envelope that morning, full of mushed-up paper as though it'd been chewed first. If it carried on he'd call the police.

Looking at his newspaper he saw one headline straight away, a disturbance in a cemetery. Spotting the name, he flung the paper down on the desk. It was going to be one of those days.

After staring out at the weeds in the playground for a while Hinkley left his office, his footsteps echoing like thunder. At the end of the corridor he saw the stationary cupboard door hanging open, half a ream of paper spewed across the floor towards the dining area. He put his hand on the door, then quickly withdrew it; it came away warm and soggy. Opening the door wider he saw the reason; glue and old newspapers scrunched up into papier-mâché, a pair of scissors among it all tacked up with the stuff, newsprint everywhere. Wasn't Jameson supposed to have cleared all this? He suddenly thought of that boy in Year 3, Wragg, always hanging around the cupboard, obsessed with papier-mâché figures, having to be restrained one day after trying to catch a bird and cover it with a bucketful of the stuff.

Standing at the entrance to the hall, which doubled as a gym, it wasn't as bad as he'd feared; the ropes were still tied back against the walls like pigtails, the hoops alongside like earrings. Looking at the burn on his hand he smiled. Yes, happy days. He'd only needed it the once. Not like now. Couldn't even discipline a child anymore. The strap never did him any harm -

Hearing a sharp crack, Hinkley looked through the window to see a figure running away, kicking clumps of grass, then clambering over a board. The boy he'd been thinking of earlier. Wragg. Talk of the devil.

The next class to the hall was Year 3's, foam tiled discoloured brown overhead, the room where the rot first set in. Across from where Mrs Collins' desk had been, the green curtain was still there, an area partitioned off for those who'd wanted to paint. His heart beat a little faster. Why was everything reminding him of it today? Pulling the curtain back with more bravado than he actually felt, he saw more of the glue mixture on the floor, the walls; suddenly he could hear that gurgling sound down the phone, mingled with other sounds he tried to block out. It was no more than the boy deserved. And nothing to what the rest of them did afterwards, apparently; thank God it had been the boys' last day, and he'd never mentioned it at the time.

He was about to leave when he saw a newspaper jammed against the skirting board. Seeing its headline he recoiled, tried to think through his panic; who else knew about this? Letting go of his breath he heard a noise at the far end of the building, a noise like a soggy paper being flung at a wall. Had that boy come back with others, throwing damp toilet paper around? Starting off towards the toilets he changed his mind and decided instead to phone Jameson; he could help deal with his - Hinkley didn't know how many of them there were.

In his office he saw that the phone had gone, along with his newspaper; there were thin, brown pools of coffee all over his desk. He heard the slopping sound again, this time nearer. Peering through a crack in his door Hinkley could only see the stationary cupboard door banging shut; he heard another wet thud. Taking his hand away from the door he saw that his fingers had become webbed with the glue mixture.

Looking for something to wipe his hands on he decided he would go and confront them himself. They were only children, he told himself. That's all.

Leaving his office and seeing the stationary cupboard, his heart jumped. All the glue pots had been emptied, and most of the remaining paper had gone. Thick globules stuck against every surface he could see; huge blotches across the floor, the size of - he pushed the idea from his mind, despite seeing they were all in pairs, sloping off unevenly, trailing wisps of newspaper across the

bare floor.

From the corner of his eye he saw a large white figure disappearing into the hall, and was glad he hadn't brought his glasses. In the Year 3 classroom he saw the green curtain ripple slowly. "I know who you are, and I'll be contacting your parents!" Then he remembered that Wragg didn't have a father; the man had died, about two years earlier. Hinkley moaned. But the name was different, and they didn't look alike, from what he remembered.

"Look, if - if you just leave now, we'll forget all about it," he said. "I'm sorry about your father. I - we didn't realise it would affect him so much."

There was another noise, but he couldn't tell where from. Breathing harder than he had in years, Hinkley ran from the room back towards his office, remembering the words on the board, guessing those he'd missed. Standing inside his door he struggled to get his breath back, listening for noises between gasps. Closing the door and wedging the chair against it he tried to think: He's just a boy; it's his word against mine. It couldn't be his son. Taking a deep breath he went to move the chair from under the door handle, get out.

With barely any sound a soft and flaky arm took him around the neck, dragging him backwards. He got a quick glimpse of his assailant in the smashed mirror; the head was eyeless, a huge swollen mash of pulp like a wasp's nest, covered in blurry newsprint. Bulky, damp arms encircled his neck. The warm smell of glue filled his nostrils as bits of soggy paper stuck to his lips. Struggling to free himself he saw the headline from his own newspaper was stuck to the face where its mouth should be.

Hinkley clawed at its arms, which made rough whispering noises without yielding; the hands were almost shapeless, resembling overgrown mittens made of soggy bread. Hinkley tried to push forward but was stopped by the chair. His knee connected sharply with it, the reaction breaking him free. In blind anger and fear he turned and lunged forward, punching the figure where its mouth should be. There was a hollow crunch as his fist sank through into the goo beneath, his hand suddenly on fire. He tried to get free but couldn't; the feel of it disgusted him, making him gag. He punched again, his other hand landing in the chest with the same result; struggling to free himself Hinkley fell backward with it still attached to him, feeling its face and body sticking to him, gurgling as the huge paper fingers wriggled inside his mouth.