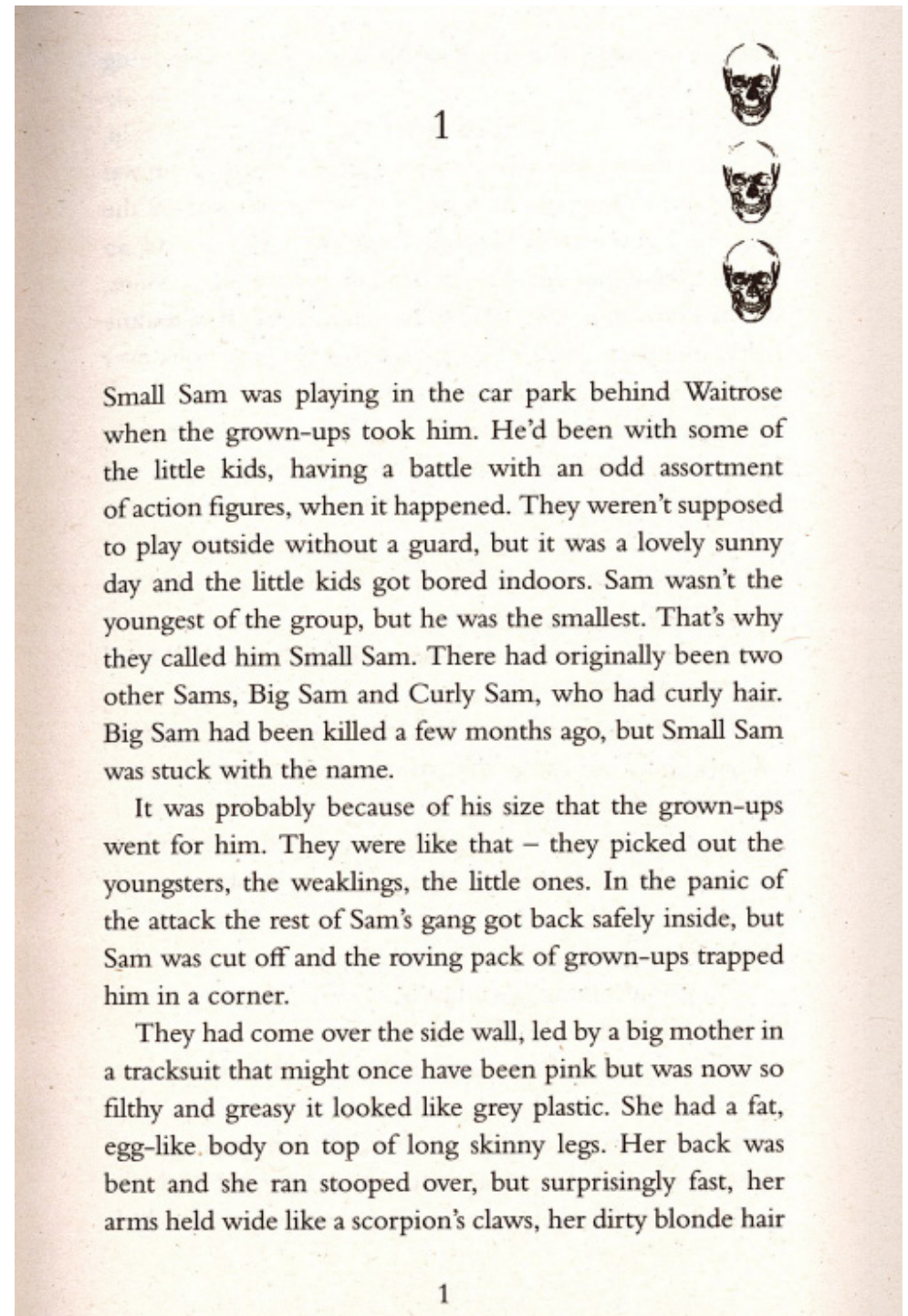


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hanging straight down. Her face blank and stupid. Breathing through her mouth.

Small Sam was too scared even to scream or call for help, and the grown-ups made no noise, so the whole scene was played out in horrible silence. The mother blocked off the route back towards the building while two lanky fathers ran at him from either side. Sam dodged them for a few seconds, but he knew they'd get hold of him in the end. By the time help came from inside, the grown-ups were gone back over the wall, with Sam stuffed inside a sack.

Maxie led a group of bigger kids out into the car park. Even though they were armed with spears and clubs and good throwing rocks they moved cautiously, not knowing exactly what to expect.

'We're too late,' said Callum, scanning the empty car park. 'They've got him.'

'Shame,' said a stocky, dark-haired kid called Josh. 'I liked him. He was funny.'

'That's the second attack this week,' said Maxie angrily. 'What's going on? Either the grown-ups are closing in on us or they're getting braver.'

'They ain't brave,' said Josh, spitting on the ground. 'If they was still here I'd show them brave. I'd mash their ugly faces. Nothing scares me.'

'So why were they here?' asked Maxie.

'They're just hungry,' said Josh.

'We're all hungry,' said Callum.

'We should have been here,' said Maxie. 'We should have been watching over them.'

'We can't be everywhere at once,' Callum pointed out. 'There's not enough of us, not with Arran out with the scav. Our job's to keep a look-out from the roof. The little

kids knew they weren't supposed to be out here. Nobody should be out here. We should all stay inside.'

'We can't stay inside all day,' scoffed Josh. 'We'd go crazy.'

'It's good inside,' said Callum.

'You're just scared to come outside,' said Josh with a smirk.

'No I ain't,' said Callum. 'No more scared than you.'

'Nothing scares me,' said Josh.

'Then you're just stupid,' said Callum.

'Nah,' said Josh. 'The thing about grown-ups is, some of them are strong, some of them can run fast and some of them are clever, but the strong ones are slow, the fast ones are stupid and the smart ones are weak.'

'Tell that to Small Sam,' said Maxie angrily, 'and to Big Sam and Johnno, and Eve and Mohammed and all the other kids we've lost.'

'Grown-ups won't get me,' said Josh.

'What?' said Callum. 'So it was their fault they got taken? Is that what you're saying?'

'Yeah, I am,' said Josh.

'Shut up,' Maxie snapped at the two of them. Then she said the thing that nobody wanted to admit. 'We can't go on like this.' Her voice was heavy with bitterness. 'Soon we're all going to be dead. I can't stand it any more.'

She threw down the spear she had been carrying and sat on the ground, resting her head in her hands.

It was her fault. That was all she could think. *It was all her fault.*

When Arran was away she was supposed to be in charge. She couldn't remember when it had been decided – *Arran was the leader, she was second in command* – it must have happened early on, when most of the kids had been too

frightened and confused to do anything for themselves. Arran and Maxie had just got on with it, organizing everyone, keeping their spirits up. Arran was clever and likeable. Right from the start he'd kept his head and not panicked. He'd been captain of the football team at William Ellis School and nothing ever seemed to freak him out.

The two of them had worked together. A team. Maxie had always been good at getting other children to help out. There were better fighters than her, true, but they were happy for her to tell them what to do. They didn't want the responsibility. And when Arran wasn't there, she was the leader.

So, it was all her fault. Another kid gone. She shut down part of her mind. She didn't want to think about what the grown-ups would do to Small Sam.

She started to cry. She didn't care who saw it.

Callum looked at Josh. They both felt awkward. In the end it was Josh who squatted down next to her and put an arm round her shoulders.

'It's all right, Max,' he said quietly. 'We'll be all right. Something'll happen, someone will come. Something's gonna change. When Arran and the others get back we'll talk about it maybe, yeah? Make a plan?'

'What's the point?' said Maxie.

'When Arran gets back, yeah?'

Maxie looked up into Josh's concerned, grubby face.

'Sorry,' she said.

'Come on,' said Callum. 'Let's try and find out how they got over the wall. Then we should get back inside.'

'Yeah.' Maxie jumped up. It was OK as long as you were doing something, as long as you didn't stop and think.

She wished Arran were here, though. She always felt safer when he was around.

It was just . . . What was he going to think?

Another kid gone.

All her fault.

Further recommendations:

