

Insomnia

By Julia Thatcher

The police station is dirty and grey and tired. We enter slowly. The constable behind the counter ignores us because he is on the phone. A dozen ugly black chairs are lined up against the wall so we sit down to wait. Twelve chairs, *forty-eight legs*.

One other person is waiting — a man with a tangled beard, torn jeans and bare feet. He holds his head in his hands and looks down.

There is a noticeboard on the opposite wall crammed with wanted posters, missing person ads and neighbourhood watch information. The floor is covered in shiny black and white tiles with patterns of triangles and squares. I follow the pattern with my eyes and feel better.

The constable finishes his phone call and Dad says, 'We need to talk to the sergeant, please.'

'Perhaps I can be of assistance,' the constable suggests.

'Thank you, no.' Dad has been quiet since earlier this morning, when he cried in my bedroom. 'I think my son should talk to the sergeant,' he says.

The constable clears his throat and shuffles some papers. 'We had a murder last night,' he says, 'and the sergeant has important matters to attend to. He'll see you in about fifteen minutes.'

'Fifteen minutes,' I say.

The constable looks sternly at me over the top of his glasses.

'Fifteen minutes,' I say. 'Nine hundred seconds.'

It is ten o'clock, *twenty-two hundred hours*, on Monday night and Mr Cooper is on the corner talking angrily into his mobile. The street is still. No cars drive past and no one walks by. Monday night is always quiet, except for Mr Cooper's phone calls. He stands under the corner streetlight which bends brightly over him, casting a glow like a halo. But Mr Cooper is no saint. Far from it.

'You'd better pay up by Saturday, you mongrel, or there will be very serious consequences.' He listens for a short time before he says, 'No bloody excuses, Schwartz. Remember, I know where you live.'

Suddenly the conversation is over and I watch as Mr Cooper lights a cigarette. He walks with long determined strides towards his house. The gate clangs, the front door shuts and he is back inside. I don't like Mr Cooper. He scares me.

My little brother goes to bed early but I hate bedtime. Sleeping is very difficult for me. When the house is quiet and dark, I am alone with my thoughts.

I think about fire. *If the house burns tonight*, I ask myself, *will I be trapped by the flames?* I plot two possible escape routes and begin to relax until my brain asks about the rest of the family, so I plan emergency exits for them too.

I try to think calmly of numbers and patterns and my model planes, but the man is here again, the man with the balaclava and the dark clothes. He comes quite often, standing just outside my bedroom door with a knife. He'll kill me if I move. I lie perfectly still for an hour, *sixty minutes, three thousand six hundred seconds*. I'm so still that it's hard to breathe. Time passes slowly. Finally he slips away and I can sleep.

Mum is always pleased with my brother at bedtime. 'Sam's a great sleeper,' she says and looks at me.

Sam's lucky, I tell myself. *There are no dark places in his mind.*

On Wednesday nights Mr Hunter plays chess. His club meets at the Royal Hotel which is just a few blocks away, so he always walks. The Hunters live directly across the road in a neat brick house which I can see clearly from my bedroom window. Mr Hunter is a retired bank manager. He is short and bald on top but there is still grey hair around his ears. He wears a suit, walks with small quick steps and carries his chess set like a briefcase.

Mrs Hunter spends a lot of time in her garden. She prunes her roses and waters her shrubs, wearing sunglasses, shorts and a big white hat.

The Hunters' house is usually in darkness quite early, but on Wednesday nights Mr Hunter is hardly ever home before eleven, *twenty-three hundred hours*, and Mrs Hunter goes to bed alone. Sometimes she wears a red nightie and sometimes she wears a black nightie. Some nights she wears no nightie at all. I know this because on Wednesday nights when she's getting ready for bed, Mrs Hunter never remembers to draw the curtains.

My bedroom is a special place. I arrange my model planes in a straight line on the wooden table by the window. The Super Hornet, then the Harrier, followed by the Mirage, the Raptor and the Growler. At first Dad helped me to assemble them, but now I can do it alone, although I'm very slow. When Mum suggests a party for my birthday I ask for a Spitfire kit instead and it takes me four days in my bedroom during the holidays to make it.

One day Sam comes in and moves my planes. He says he just wants to play with them but everything is out of balance. He has changed the order so that the Harrier and the Raptor are in the wrong places. I get him in a headlock. His face turns red and he goes a bit floppy. Dad comes in and hits me. Sam falls on the floor and Mum cries. Dad tells me to never, never hurt Sam again. 'He's your little brother,' he says.

Now we have a rule. Sam is forbidden to come into my room or to touch my things and vice versa. Perhaps that is two rules, not one.

The sergeant has still not appeared, *triangle, square, triangle, square*, but another officer comes in with a protesting drunk and takes him straight through a heavy white door on our right.

'Probably to the holding cells,' Dad whispers. *Black triangle, white square, white triangle, black square*.

The man in the jeans stands suddenly and looks like he is going to be sick.

'Don't spew in here, you dirty bastard,' the constable shouts. 'Get outside!' The jeans man rushes out the door.

I look around quickly for some numbers. There is a clock on the wall behind the counter. The numbers curve around the dial in their usual circle. 'Seventy-eight,' I say.

'What was that?' the constable asks.

I look past his head. 'Twelve numbers, seventy-eight,' I repeat. There is a pause while the constable turns his head, looks at the clock and thinks.

'That's clever,' he says.

'Andrew is very interested in numbers,' Dad explains. 'He thinks about them all the time.'

For some reason I'm not sure of, Tuesday and Thursday are exercise nights in our street, nights when many of our neighbours go jogging or walk their dogs in the cool of the evening. Through my open window I hear the pounding of footsteps, the quick click of dogs' claws, and heavy breathing. Sometimes the runners stop to exchange a few breathless words and the dogs sniff each other. David Lawson and Sally from next door are good athletes from the high school. They run together and always kiss each other goodnight before parting.

But there is another jogger who doesn't fit the pattern. He is a tall muscular man who runs easily. I don't recognise him so I know he doesn't live close by. He is different in another way, too. He jogs on Wednesday nights. At first I don't see him because he's hiding. He's half-hidden by the shrubs outside Mrs Hunter's bedroom window, but he is always there. At nine o'clock, *twenty-one hundred hours*, he is always there, watching, and when Mrs Hunter turns the light out, he jogs away.

There were many, many fights about my bedtime. When I was younger I screamed and broke lots of things. I couldn't find the words to tell Mum and Dad about lying awake in the dark. They didn't understand that it was hard. When Mum said she and Dad needed some time to themselves in the evening, I shouted at them. Finally we came to an agreement. Mum calls it a 'truce'.

When bedtime comes I have to go to my room and stay there quietly. I have one hour, *sixty minutes*, to use my iPad, read, or arrange my models and planes. After an hour Mum and Dad come in, say goodnight and switch off the light. I get used to this routine, but not to the sleeplessness.

I sit by my bedroom window, staring into the gloom of the street and this is when I discover the things that happen in our neighbourhood at night.

The kids at school all say, 'You're a real weirdo, Andrew,' but some of my neighbours do really strange things after dark.

Friday and Saturday nights in our street are full of action. People go past on their way to the hotel or to sporting matches or dinner dates. They return noisily in taxis, in cars with designated drivers, or on foot. I know some of them, but not everyone. Most are young people and most are happy. I wonder if I will be like that one day. Sometimes couples kiss under the streetlight or sit talking on the kerb. The boys pee in the gutter and the girls giggle and turn away. 'That's disgusting!' they say.

Once there was a fist fight and once a police car screamed past flashing its lights.

I decide to make lists of the cars and taxis that go past. I turn the lists into frequency tables and graphs which I draw in a special book. I plot coordinates for the line graphs and construct wedges for the pie graphs. Then I put the notebook under my pillow and feel safe. Friday and Saturday nights are my favourites.

It's Monday again and I have not had a good day at school. In my bedroom I arrange my old Lego bricks in long rows and tall columns of green and yellow. Seven columns of eight greens. *Seven eights are fifty-six.* Thirteen rows of five yellows. *Thirteen fives are sixty-five. Fifty-six. Sixty-five. Fifty-six. Sixty-five.*

When my parents come in to say goodnight they see the arrays and look at each other. Mum gives me an extra kiss.

'Green and gold,' Dad says, 'the colours of Australia.'

The night is hot and still. I toss in my bed, stare at the ceiling and think about my day at school. I imagine that I can smell smoke and mentally revise my escape routes. I don't want to see Mr Cooper or listen to his threats but I open the window a bit wider and look out anyway.

It is a quarter past ten, *twenty-two fifteen hours*, and there he is, pacing under the streetlight, making a call he thinks no one can hear.

'Your payment is due, Ellis. I know where your wife works, you shithead, and where your brats go to school.' This is standard Mr Cooper talk. Bully talk. He puts his phone away and reaches into his pocket for a cigarette.

This is the moment the Monday night pattern changes forever. It happens in seconds but it is huge and clear in my head.

A car glides softly around the corner. I watch as Mr Cooper's head jerks up. He seems startled, unsure. When I am older I hear the saying about a deer caught in the headlights and I think how perfectly it fits.

He takes a step backwards, there is a loud crack and the car slides away. For a short time Mr Cooper lies twitching on the cement footpath underneath the light and the circling moths. Then he is still.

Almost immediately the neighbourhood wakes. There are lights and voices. I run to my parents' bedroom, my heart racing. Sam and I stay inside with Mum, while

Dad and the other men go out to investigate. The sirens are so loud that I put my hands over my ears.

No one sleeps that night except for Mr Cooper who will never wake up.

'It's an awful thing to happen in our quiet neighbourhood,' Mum says at breakfast time. 'It's frightening for the children and devastating for his poor family.'

I can't eat my breakfast. I think my head is going to burst.

'They say he was a debt collector,' Dad says. 'The police are assuming he has made a few enemies. Apparently his methods were over the top.'

Mum feels my forehead. 'Are you okay, Andrew?'

Everything will change when I tell them. *Ten, nine, eight, seven, six...*

They are all watching me.

Mum puts her hands on mine to keep them still. *Five, four, three, two, one...*

'Andrew,' Mum says, 'what's wrong?'

Zero.

'I was awake,' I say. 'I was looking out my bedroom window and I saw what happened.'

That is the end of breakfast. I take Dad into my bedroom and show him my book of lists and graphs. I turn the pages until I get to the important one.

'I didn't see the driver,' I say, 'but it was this car here. I've seen it before.' I show him my entry with the car's colour, make and licence plate.

Dad sits down on my bed. 'You did all this?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'You filled all these pages at night while we were asleep?'

'Yes.'

Dad puts his arm around me and cries. I have never seen him cry before.

Things finally start to move at the police station. Someone from the Salvation Army comes to collect the man with the beard and the sergeant emerges from his office. Dad stands and introduces himself before the constable can speak. 'My son has important information about last night's murder,' he says.

I feel nervous but Dad puts his hand on my shoulder. Sergeant Newman listens carefully. He seems to like my notebook. He calls the constable in and

together they ask me lots of questions about my tallies and diagrams. Nobody calls me weird and Dad seems proud.

'Perhaps you'll be a detective one day,' the sergeant says.

Unfortunately the police have to take my notebook and they say I will probably be required to give evidence at some time in the future.

White square, black triangle, white square, black triangle, white square.

As we leave, the constable says, 'Hey, Andrew, do you know the Fibonacci sequence?'

I tell him I don't, but I am interested. He gives me a brand new police notebook and writes the numbers in that.

Dad and I drive home. So much has happened since last night. I'm exhausted and can't wait to get back to my room.

I look at the numbers in my new notebook, *one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one, thirty-four...*and I begin to feel better.