

BLUSH

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I'M STANDING in a bright gallery with lots of strange art on the walls. It's some sort of party with about fifty people milling around, mostly adults. No dogs, thankfully. But enough of a crowd to cause a nice little scene. I walk my host's body over to the snack table and climb up onto it, placing my feet on either side of a bowl of hummus.

Everyone looks this way and the room descends into silence. I stick my thumbs in my ears and wiggle my fingers, while swallowing lots of air. I hold it for a second then let out an enormous belch.

“BUUUUUUURRRP!”

The woman in front of me goes bright red. Her mouth is flapping open like a thirsty fish. She must be this girl's mother. Good. All the more embarrassment for me. I lean forwards and blow the biggest raspberry I can, right in her face.

“THBRRRRRRRR!”

She gasps, then snatches me off the table and carries me out of the building. I don't mind, though. I am already full.

I feel that familiar sensation in my head. Like my brain is being sucked through a straw. Then the art gallery is gone.

I'm in a classroom now. Sitting at a desk, staring up at the teacher at the front of the room. My new lips twist into a smile.

I love schools.

There's embarrassment everywhere you look. And no dogs. It's almost too easy.

I bet you're wondering who I am? You probably haven't heard of me, but I'm sure you've seen me before. Think of a time when someone you know did something ridiculous. Something completely embarrassing and out of character. Maybe your grandmother started howling in the middle of a church service. Or your dad danced like

a lunatic at a school disco. Well, that could have been me! My name is Blush and I am your worst nightmare.

What do you look like? I hear you wonder. Do I have hairy teeth or googly eyes, like your other nightmares?

No, I do not!

I look like you, or your neighbour. Your parents. Or perhaps even your teacher. I move from body to body, causing awkwardness wherever I go. You see, I hate anything ordinary and sensible. I feed off people's embarrassment. To me, a wrong answer in class is delicious. Throw in a few stains on the seat of my trousers and perhaps my flies open and I'll blush enough to move onto the next victim.

Right now I'm inside this little boy's body. His teacher is the most boring lady who's ever lived. She's prattling on and on and on. It's nearly killing me. I want to jump up and say something silly, but I need to time this right. The timetable on the whiteboard says we have assembly soon, right after show-and-tell. If I can wait until then a well-timed fart will give me a week's worth of embarrassment. And anyway, I'm still full from my last feed.

My fingers are twitching. My toes are wriggling. I don't like sitting still. I wish I could scream at the top of my lungs. Tell the teacher that I love her. That she is the most gorgeous thing since frilly knickers were invented. But it would be a waste. Like eating all your dinner when you've got an entire bag of lollies in your bedroom.

Then something terrible happens. Something absolutely awful.

The door opens.

And.

In walks ...

A DOG!

Everybody has their nightmares, their nemesis. And here is mine. Dragging a little girl along by its lead.

You see, dogs can sense me. They know when I'm close. They bark, they howl and they bite. But worst of all, they scare me. And if I get too scared, I get sucked in. I become the dog. And it might take me years to get back into another human. I'll be stuck inside the dog, sniffing other dogs' butts and only feeding off tiny scraps of

embarrassment. Last time it took me six years to earn enough embarrassment to move on.

I need to act now; to do something crazy. So that I jump to another body, far away from this evil dog.

Something quick and easy.

Ah ... I know. The 'I love you' routine! That never fails.

I hop up from my desk, knocking my chair over. All eyes turn away from the dog and stare straight at me. The dog is still calm. It hasn't noticed me yet.

I must move quickly.

Rushing towards the nearest girl, I pucker my lips and give her a huge kiss on the cheek.

“Thmmwwaaaaa!”

The class is stunned into silence.

In my sweetest voice I say, “I love you SOOOOOOOOOO much!”

The girl's face goes bright pink. Perfect. Any second now I should have enough embarrassment to move on.

Except I don't.

Suddenly everyone is looking away from me.

The dog is barking. And I mean CRAZY barking. It's pulling on its lead, nearly dragging its owner across the room like she's water-skiing.

The teacher is as scared as me. “Is it safe?” she asks nervously. “You know we have to choose carefully for show-and-tell.”

I can feel the fear building up inside me, sweeping the embarrassment aside.

I have to do something. I can't let fear win.

What can I do? I need something really embarrassing. Right now.

Then I have a brainwave. It's perfect.

The dog is pulling at its lead now, barking its head off. I wait until there is a pause in the noise and I pull out my big guns.

Looking the teacher directly in the eye, I say, “Help me, Mummy!”

I did it. I called the teacher 'Mummy' in front of the whole class.

That should do it.

Any second now I'll be hopping into another body. Far away from that evil dog.

But I don't.

I'm still here. The dog is still barking at me. The fear is still growing.

"Don't worry, dear," the teacher says, looking straight at me. "It's on a lead. It can't hurt you."

No one's laughing. No one's blushing. I can't believe it. Never before has 'Mummy' failed me at school.

It can only mean one thing. The teacher actually is this boy's mother! And if that is the case, I'm going to be okay. All I have to do is act naughty for a minute and the teacher's blushes will fill me up till Christmas.

But I don't get the chance to be naughty.

The dog gives a frantic pull and its owner lets go of the lead.

That's it. I'm doomed.

The evil thing barges kids and desks out of the way, trying to get at me. It's all teeth and bark and it's coming straight for me. I don't know what it will do when it reaches me.

The fear builds up in my stomach.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

This is so bad. I don't want to be stuck inside a dog again. Starved of embarrassment. How can this be happening?

I quickly leap up onto a desk. Usually when I stand on a desk I'm surrounded by shame. This time, people are scared for me. And their fear is building up inside me, adding to my own.

"Get your dog under control, Holly!" the teacher is shouting. "Before someone gets hurt!"

But there's not enough time. The fear is tugging at my brain. Any second now my mind will be sucked into the dog.

Then something amazing happens.

Something incredible.

The dog jumps up at the desk and tries to bite me. I move my leg back just in time and it grabs hold of my trouser leg.

I am standing there. On the desk. With a dog actually hanging from my trouser leg. I feel the strain in my waist. Then PING!

My button flies off across the classroom and my trousers slip down around my ankles.

This is amazing!

It's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Suddenly the whole class is laughing and pointing.

I am standing on the desk in my undies, with embarrassment flooding over me, washing that horrible fear away.

Maybe this will be enough to send me far away. Please, let it be enough!

But it isn't.

School desks are always rather flimsy, and this one is no exception. I can feel it swaying under the weight of me and the dog.

All of a sudden the desk collapses and I'm lying in a heap on the floor.

The dog can't believe its luck. It lets go of my trousers and leaps onto my chest, its teeth bared in an evil snarl.

This is actually my worst nightmare.

Even with my trousers around my ankles the fear is stronger than the embarrassment. I can feel it rising up. Overwhelming me.

The dog is barking now. Right in my face. It's going to bite me at any moment. I just know it is.

"Mummy!" I scream.

"I wet the bed!" Anything that will give me enough embarrassment to escape.

"I've just done a poo in my pants!"

But no one hears me. The dog's barking drowns me out.

Then I feel it.

The sucking.

Oh no

Oh no.

OH NO!

Not the sucking.

My brain. Through a straw.

And then, BAM!

I'm looking down at a little boy. A terrified little boy.

My tongue is hanging out. I'm panting heavily. But not barking.

There's a sharp yank at my neck as the lead is pulled.

"Monty, come here, you bad dog!" the girl is shouting.

She pulls on the lead again, dragging me across the room towards the door.

Everyone is staring at me. My tail is tucked between my legs and I can feel the tiniest bit of embarrassment. But it's certainly not enough to get me out of here. That is going to take a very long time.

To be continued ...