

“I’ll cut through the park today . . . yesss!” Jack called out as he ran, with only himself and the breeze to hear. Chills went up and down his spine as soon as the words were out; but his mind was busy, busy, busy and he missed the signal his body sent him.

Today was Jack’s birthday - his special thirteenth- and his mind was filled with thoughts of what presents his family had for him. He had decided to take the short cut through the park to get home sooner.

Jack had always been an early riser, and up earlier than anyone else in the family. And, ever since his last birthday, his parents had agreed he was then old enough to go jogging alone, before breakfast, every day. Usually he loved being out and about and active, but today he really hadn't felt like going for a run. But he had to fill in time until everyone was out of bed, to give him his presents, so he took off for his usual hour or so run. When he arrived home the family- his mother, father and younger sister Kate- would be up and ready to help him celebrate his special day. And to give him his birthday presents!

As Jack headed into the park he glanced at his watch. It was exactly six-thirty. Around the time his family usually got out of bed. He smiled as he pictured his gifts being retrieved from the ‘none too secret’ usual hiding places in their house.

Some of the presents- those from the ‘out of town’ relatives- had arrived in the post while Jack was at school. And he knew his mother bought the remaining ones while he was out playing one of the many sports he loved. Then the gifts were lovingly wrapped into three separate parcels, from his mother, father and Kate.

And the brightly wrapped gifts were always on the floor beside his usual place at the breakfast table. It was a birthday tradition their parents started as soon as Kate and Jack had outgrown their high-chairs, and were able to sit by themselves at the table with the adults.

I bet I don't get what I want, from them, Jack thought, as he jogged through the seemingly empty park. Not that he didn't like the kinds of presents his immediate family usually gave him. He did. They always gave him okay presents. They just never gave him what he *really* wanted. But it wasn't their fault, he mused. He never told anyone *what* he wanted, so how could they know what to give him? And, unlike Kate, he didn't even give out any hints.

Then Jack recalled how Nina, his grandmother, had known what he wanted the past couple of years. Yet he hadn't given her any clues, either. He hadn't thought about it before, but now he did, Jack couldn't remember a birthday when his grandmother *hadn't* given him a present he *really* wanted.

Every year, when Nina came to dinner on the night of his birthday, she had a special gift for him. Something he truly fancied. As Jack thought more about it, he realized his grandmother always gave Kate something she really loved, for her birthdays, too.

“Gran must have just made some lucky guesses,” Jack thought aloud. What other explanation was there for Nina always knowing what they wished for on their birthdays? And he knew Kate only ever gave hints about what she wanted to their parents, not to Gran.

“Ah . . . but this year there's just no way Gran will guess what I want- no way at all, ” he continued talking to himself, as he made his way through the park.

And, even if Nina did fluke knowing what he wanted, it didn't matter; for it wasn't physically possible for him to receive it, anyway, his thoughts continued, and he shook his head.

Jack knew what he longed for, this birthday, was different from anything he had ever wanted in his whole life. It was certainly unlike the skateboard he had his heart set on for his last birthday, and he now owned, thanks to his grandmother.

Nina always checked with the parents before buying any presents for Kate and Jack, though. And every year, so far, they had agreed it was fine for her to give her grandchildren what she had planned. And somehow Nina always seemed to know exactly what to give.

“Even if you do get it right again this year, Gran, well no way- it’s just not possible for you to give it to me. Not this time!” Jack exclaimed, and laughed as he jogged past the toilet block; near where he was about to exit from the park.

“Who ya talking to laughing boy?” Jack was startled to hear.

“Yeah . . . and where ya goin?”

Jack turned his head in the direction of the mocking voices, and caught sight of a group of youths. He saw they had sticks or bats in their hands, as they emerged from behind the toilet block. They were slightly behind him and about ten yards away, on his left side.

“Ohhh no,” Jack cried out inside, as a feeling of dread washed over him. Immediately he regretted not listening to his parents’ good advice about staying away from toilet blocks; when out running early, or late, and alone.

But it was too late to go back in time to change what might have been. Right then was the only time he had, and he willed his legs to move from a jog to a sprint. He had to get out of the park. And quick.

“Git him and his Nikes,” yelled one of the gang, and confirmed Jack’s feeling of imminent danger.

“Ohhhhh! Why was I so stupid!?” he cried, as he found himself on the footpath outside the park. He turned right, in the direction of his home, and ran as hard, and as fast, as he ever had.

It was Sunday and the street Jack ran out to was empty of cars and people. The area was part of the industrial area of the city, so there were no houses nearby. No doors for him to knock on for help. And nobody around to call out to for assistance. And he knew the gang- four of them, he guessed from

what he had seen-was gaining on him; for their shouting was getting louder. They were too close for comfort now.

Ahead, on the opposite side, Jack saw a street, so he gathered speed, pushing his body to its limits, and darted across the deserted road.

“We're gonna git ya!” Jack heard one of them yell, as he dashed across the empty street at lightning speed. But he was nearly out of breath. Huffing and puffing, he turned into the side street.

There were no houses as far as the eye could see. Only industrial sheds and empty allotments lined the streets.

Jack was scared, but he kept running as fast as he could, until his body was ready to drop. It was only then he allowed himself a glance behind. He saw he was now a good distance ahead of the gang. He hadn't stopped to get a good look at them, but from the brief glance he had, they appeared to be aged about fifteen or sixteen. All he knew about them, for sure, was they weren't interested in engaging him in a friendly chat. They were creeps!

“Oh boy . . . lucky I didn't stop . . . lucky I started to run . . . as soon as I did,” Jack gasped for breath, as he continued pushing his now aching body to its limits. If he hadn't sensed danger when he did, and taken off, they would have attacked him by now. The intense pain he felt in his body was something he had never felt before, and he knew they would catch him soon. Unless something-or someone- saved him.

Suddenly, a particular story his grandmother, Nina, had told her grandchildren, continuously over the years, flashed through his mind. About what to do, if they ever needed help.

“If ever you children need to know something, never be afraid to ask someone for help; because that is how we all learn,” Jack recalled his grandmother saying.

“And, if ever you find yourself in trouble, or if you are in need of help of any kind- even if there is nobody around- you can still ask for help. And get it,

too! You will be surprised what will happen, if you really want to be helped. And try to be still for a moment, so you can hear the answer, for it will come in ways you might not expect. But the help you need will come. When you ask for it, of course. That is important. You actually need to ask for help, for it to come.” Jack heard his grandmother’s words, like she was with him and whispering in his ear.

“Oh, and never forget your good manners. Always say “Please” when you ask for help, and then don't forget to say “Thank you”, when you are given the help, of course,” Gran had continued, with a twinkle in her eyes.

Whenever Nina relayed this story to them, Jack and Kate always thought it was a bit strange. Why would you ask for help, if there wasn't anyone around to hear you? But they didn't question their grandmother. They just smiled at her and said, “Right, Gran,” and then winked at each other. When she wasn't looking, of course.

Nina was always telling her grandchildren stories, and Jack had forgotten all about this one. Because he hadn't needed to think about anything to do with getting help. Not until that very moment!

He looked behind and saw the gang was getting closer. Maybe about ten or fifteen yards away. And he was getting weaker. And his body was beginning to cramp. He had to do something different- or get caught.

“I don't care how weird . . . Gran said to ask . . . can't hurt . . . I really need help . . . if anyone can hear me . . . I need help now . . . Please help me . . . help me . . . help me . . . I need help . . . please . . . please . . . please . . . please!”

Jack put his words out on the breeze which, since the gang started following him, had become a howling wind.

After he called out for help, he couldn't be completely quiet like Nina had advised; for he still had to keep running. But he listened as carefully as he could.

And what happened took Jack by surprise. As soon as his pleading words were out, his legs began to move fast again. And he felt a strong urge to push them even faster than when he first saw the gang. His tired body regained strength, and faster and faster he ran. He had never run so fast in his entire life. When he had been in races at school, and won, he had not run as fast as he did now. It was like his body was being jet propelled.

“Wow . . . cool!” Jack cried out, as he took off towards the intersection in front of him. He knew he had to go straight ahead there. He had to run directly across the crossroads he was drawing closer to, as he ran so fast.

It was essential he go straight ahead. He was not to turn right there. And he was not to turn left. He didn't know why it was important to go straight ahead. He just knew it was imperative he did. It was a feeling he had.

Jack went along with his hunch, and slowed his running pace as he approached the intersection. There was no traffic coming from any direction, so he resumed speed, and across and ahead he went. He ran faster than he had ever run before in his life. And even though his speed had increased, his body didn't ache any more.

When he was clear of the T-junction, he slowed his pace, slightly, to take a bigger breath and glance around.

The gang was approaching the crossroads. About ten seconds later, Jack looked behind again, then suddenly stopped his frantic pace. And then he stopped running altogether. He turned his whole body around and stood absolutely still.

As he looked in the direction he had come from, his mouth dropped open in amazement. Then he said slowly, the two words he had recently adopted to sum up his feelings of amazement, “Wow . . . cool!”

Split and bulging dark green garbage bags now covered part of the road Jack had run across, less than a minute or so before. And he had seen what happened. He had looked behind as the bags were falling off the back of a truck.

And not only had he seen the garbage fall, but Jack had watched as it fell onto his pursuers.

“Wow . . . cool,” were the only words he had to express what he saw; as he watched the truck driver stop his truck and run back to see if the youths were hurt. Jack couldn't believe how one moment he was frightened for his safety, and then it was all over. And in such an unexpected way. It was the last thing he imagined. To be saved by garbage bags!

Jack shook his head slowly and breathed a deep sigh of relief. He saw that the gang seemed to be all right, as the truck driver helped each one to his feet. While he was relieved no one was hurt badly, Jack felt even better he was out of danger. There was no way the limping teenagers were any threat to him now - no way at all!

How lucky the truck just happened to be passing; at the exact moment the gang was crossing the road in a hurry to catch him, Jack thought. And how fortunate, also, the garbage bags were not tied down. And there had to be a bump in the road, and the truck to hit it, for the garbage to fall. Oh . . . and he had to run the fastest he had ever run, in his life, to be far enough away so they didn't reach him. Altogether, strokes of luck were everywhere!

It had to be luck, Jack thought, as he slowly made his way home. It couldn't be anything else that had saved him. It just wasn't possible help had arrived from some unseen source, or force. Just because he had asked. That was too weird!

Jack didn't say “Thank you” like his grandmother had said to do, after asking for help and it came. Because luck had to be the reason he was helped. But in case he was wrong, and there really was some hidden, helpful power around, he decided to cover himself and said politely, “Well, whatever happened, I'm really thankful to be in one piece, and that I'm *not* going to be celebrating my birthday in hospital -or worse!”

And this time Jack felt the shiver that went up and down his spine,

as he thought of what might have happened if the gang had caught up with him.

“But nothing bad did happen to me,” he said quickly, to rid himself of any negative thoughts. “I’m fine, and I’m happy I will be able to celebrate my birthday at home.”

Speaking about his birthday led Jack to think of his family again. And he wanted to be home with them. And to open the presents waiting for him. Who cared if they weren’t exactly what he wanted? He didn’t.

Nothing like a scare to remember what’s important in life, he thought and smiled as he started to run faster. But not as fast as he had run when he was being chased. There was no need to run that fast now. He was no longer in danger.