

# THE CHIRNSIDE EXPERIMENT



A SHORT STORY BY

C. J. MARKS

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*The Chirnside Experiment* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Inspired by a dream.

Crash!

I bolt upright in bed, violently jostled from a deep, uneasy sleep by what sounds to me like a car slamming into something just outside my window. Heart racing, I fumble for my phone on the nightstand. 6:15AM blinks back at me. I blink too, surprised by the time. For the first time, since moving into the new place, I slept through the night. Usually, I don't make it past 1:00. I glance over to my left and recognise the crumpled-up bedsheets and the indent on the pillow from where Ferguson was sleeping - the cold silhouette of what hours before inhabited a warm body. A now familiar sight. Since starting this new job, he's been coming home later and leaving earlier. I know how much his career in autonomous systems means to him, and I get it, I do. Largely because he's so quick to point it out every time I voice my concern about him not spending time with his own family anymore; but also, his insistence that the important work he does at Alpatron Eugenics is for our family, for our future. What does that mean anyway! He is hardly home long enough for the two of us to have an adult conversation about the reason we've been summoned to the other side of the world at a whim. A "momentous breakthrough in science" is what his boss boisterously declared at the time, and we were on the first flight out.

Things have been moving pretty quickly since we arrived in Point Cook - a military town located in the far south of Australia. Quiet and quaint enough, yet I can't shake this nagging feeling that everything is not as it seems - nor this godawful headache. Ever since our arrival just over two weeks ago, I've not been feeling myself, putting it down to the jetlag at first, from literally time-traveling into the future. South Africa is a long way from here after all. Jade, Mick, and Rafe, our three high schoolers and only months apart in age, needed no more than a couple of days to fully recover, if that. I'm grateful, relieved honestly, that they are handling being uprooted from their whole life like true champs; and surprised they have already befriended the neighbourhood kids - all of whom, oddly, attend the same high school. Chirnside High.

I twist the crystal wand hanging down the side of the wooden French shutters above the bedframe just slightly. The Winter sun hits my eyes first before its rays fill the rest of the room. Then suddenly, my entire body turns to ice at the sight of blood and guts splattered across the outside of the window. Lots of blood and guts. Peering over the ledge, I'm horrified at the sight of at least half a dozen magpies slaughtered on the grass down below - ripped apart by the forceful impact with the glass. That solves the mystery of the crash; but why was it suddenly raining birds. "Bloody Hell!", I cry in disbelief at the absurdity of it all, "but it's the dead of Winter," I argue with myself, having read somewhere that escapes me now, it's common for birds to fly into windows during mating season in the Spring, often in an ill-fated pursuit to protect their young, by mistaking their reflection for a threat. Before I can conjure up a plan of how I am going to get rid of the mutilated bodies before the children see the horror scene, I hear movement somewhere in the house. Then I remember, it's their first day at the new school.

Through the hullabaloo and excitement of the morning - me frantically pushing for the children to be on time for school and to make a good first impression in their freshly steamed green and blue tartan and polished black leather lace-ups - packing their lunch had completely slipped our minds. I glimpse the old school building's long slender spire rising above the

humble suburban homes, like an overlord over its subjects, as I near an accusing red light. I'm captivated by the school's magnificent wrought-iron gates as it reluctantly swings open to invite us in, creaking and moaning as it does so. The gates frame what appears to be a former manor house with an austere medieval-like structure. Slightly out of place in a modern neighbourhood like this I frown bemused. The kids rush off before the car comes to a complete stop. I hurriedly promise to return shortly with their lunch, but I don't think they hear me. I attempt calling out more first-day-of-school words of encouragement, but my words are swatted away by the ghostly hand of the breeze. Only mildly annoyed, I begin to back the Mazda out of the school parking lot when I realise mine is the only car there; and where are all the students? We can't be late, can we? It's only just gone eight thirty.

Less than an hour later I arrive back at the school, lunch in hand, and I am met with quite a stately entrance hall. No surprises there. Its high ceilings reverberate with the buzzing sound of what looks like a bunch of teachers engaged in some important assignment. There is a choir of deliberation and they are so engrossed, no one notices me enter. I hesitate for a moment, fearing that I may undo many hours of evidently important work. I swallow hard then clear my throat as I timidly approach one of the faculty members. When it becomes clear the male teacher I approached is still none the wiser of my existence, I reluctantly reach out and tap his shoulder. This gets his attention. He turns my way momentarily, looks away, and then instantly turns back to get a good look at me. At first, he's genuinely confused by my presence, and then just utterly annoyed. I ask if he can point me in the direction of the front office so I can leave the lunch with the secretary. Having already continued his urgent task, the annoyed teacher warns me to forget about the lunch, turn back at once, and go home. Though he says this in a calm and composed manner, I find his warning anything but comforting.

An old guy with short silver hair on his head and a beard to match appears from a dark, almost hidden, spiral staircase that I did not see there before. Shadows swirl around him as he moves into full view, creating the illusion of him floating rather than walking. I feel his ominous presence before I hear any footsteps. Clothed in a long black overcoat, I determine that he must be the school headmaster. Then, abruptly and rather robotically, the buzzing teachers all come to a synchronised halt. An eerie silence fills the hall. The old headmaster makes a brief, authoritative announcement into the hollowed room, and again, I feel vibrations of the acoustics rather than hear him speak. He disappears just as suddenly as he appeared, back into the dark shadows from where the spiral staircase lurks. With the cohort at once back to their surreptitious task, I decide to make a beeline for the creepy staircase before anyone notices me. I have to find out for myself where it leads and where the headmaster so mysteriously disappeared to.

The creaking sigh the oak stairs lets out as I gently place one sneakered foot in front of the other alerts me to its declining age. Though not exactly suffering from utter ruin, its seen better days. The hardwood is a befitting deep brown oak for its setting, and on it are carved the most intriguing symbols. The school reminds me of Hogwarts from the popular Harry Potter books I read as a kid. An extraordinary school for such an ordinary, suburban neighbourhood, the thought again comes to mind. And at least centuries old. With curiosity as my guide, I follow it further up the stairs. By now the headmaster had long gone, swallowed whole by the shadows. Then, the stairway stops unexpectedly. There's no way up. It is a dead-end in the middle of the stairwell. I'm suddenly overcome by more than just curiosity. A more

ominous aura now looms in the chilly air of the fortress. I look around me, frightened. I feel the creeps crawling up and down my spine, and a sweat breaks the surface of the skin beneath my bra wire. Is this not where all the students would have to pass through to get to their classes? But how? At a glance, the school appears to have been built to keep unwelcome visitors out, or, a thought tingles in the back of my brain, has it been created to keep us in?

Realising I need to find another way up, I look around and spot a narrow, barely-there opening to my left with more stairs, but this time leading back down. I suck in my breath in a dramatic effort to squeeze myself through the hobbit-sized opening and down the dark stairs. The creeps have now fully taken over all my bodily functions, and my senses are on high alert. What kind of entrance is this? Where does it lead? And how does the old headmaster make it so easily through these tiny, dark spaces? Looking down at my hands, now invisible, I remember the children's lunch. I've completely forgotten why I was there to begin with. I've become so intrigued with solving the mystery of the strange school with its strange teachers and even stranger spiral staircase. Another thought hit me then like a bucket of ice-cold water in the face - I haven't heard any sounds coming from the students for the last thirty minutes or so that I've been here. In fact, I haven't heard any movement resembling a typical school environment since I left the teachers to continue their secret mission downstairs. Or was it upstairs? Where exactly was I, and where were these darn stairs leading me?

That this is not just your typical high school, has by now become glaringly clear. Something sinister is going on at Chirnside High, and if it involves the safety of my children, I am going to do everything in my power to find out what it is. Still stuck in the dark, hobbit-like hole in the stairs, and not sure whether I am going up or down, I continue with my newfound resolve to find the headmaster and demand answers about his Chamber of Secrets. My eyes not yet adjusted to the dark, I feel my way along the banister as I take one measured step at a time. Each step matching the pace of my breathing. My heart racing as my shaky hand glides along. Then it touches something. I let out a muffled shriek and jerk my hand back from the banister like it's been burned. I stand there frozen in a serpentine-like pose, listening for any sound or movement brought on by my screaming. When nothing happens, I hesitantly reach my hand back out to the banister, and there it is - a lever. I squeeze my eyes shut tight and count to three, pulling the lever up as hard as I possibly can.

I try to open my eyes, but they are so heavy, like I've been drugged. Excruciating pain shoots through my whole body as though every bone in it have shattered. I wince as I remember those poor birds. I can't tell exactly what the source of the pain is, but my arms - my arms are definitely having the worst of it. I try to move them, but it just hurts more. Then I realise with horror that's because they are bound. Where am I? "You've been warned, you know", sounds a booming voice from somewhere behind me. I suddenly become aware of the cold, hard, cement floor I must've landed on when I fell through the stairs. I'm in nothing but my Lululemon gym tights and a t-shirt, and my hands are firmly tied to a metal pipe. It's freezing in here, wherever here is. I try with all the strength left in me to turn my head towards the voice, and then I see its conduit - the annoyed teacher from earlier. "You should have left when I told you to", he comes to stand right in front of me, and my gaze follows his towering frame up to his face. The lights are so blinding, I have to squint my eyes to get a better look at him. Just then, the old headmaster comes into view from behind him. Like before, he appears

as though out of thin air. “You know, dear child, your husband is not going to like that you are interfering with decades of hard work and planning”.

“My husband?” I said in a voice shaking with a lethal cocktail of fear, confusion, and disbelief. “What does Ferg have to do with this? I’m only delivering my children their school lunch”. Then I frantically start searching for the brown paper bags, as if they can provide me with some sort of lifeline. “Oh, don’t worry about that, sweetheart,” said a third voice, we’ve already cleaned that up after you “dropped in” unannounced. Teacher guy smirks at the irony, but the old headmaster maintains his soulless disposition. I follow his eyes as they look up to the ceiling and I’m amazed I survived the fall after pulling that damned lever. “I need to get that to my children if you will kindly untie my arms and just let me go”. The tears start streaming down my face, but I don’t feel them. I see the drops fall onto my pink tights in slow motion, but I don’t make a sound. I’m numb. “The kids won’t need that honey”, said third voice, this time sounding awfully familiar. “Ferguson?” I hesitate, afraid that he’ll confirm my worst fears. “You shouldn’t be here. Why can’t you just mind your god-damned business!”. I still can’t see him, because he’s somewhere behind teacher guy and the old headmaster, but I know that voice, although I don’t remember it ever being so menacing and cruel. Someone gently frees my hands and helps me to my feet. I turn around, and staring back at me are the same hazel eyes I loved getting lost into for so many years, except this time they were not reciprocating that love; they were filled with...nothing.

I want to ask him what he’s doing at Chirnside, but something tells me - has been telling me - since I started up that creepy stairwell, that this is no school. Instead, I confirm, “So, this is what kept you away from us all those late nights. This is why we were flown out here so suddenly. It’s not even a school, it looks like a laboratory. I spit out the last word like I’ve tasted something bitter. It hit me then that the brown paper bags would no longer be needed. “Where are my children? What have you done with them?” Without a word or a hint of emotion, he turns his back on me and joins the other two men in the cold, sterile room. “Your children, Mrs. Marconi”, says the old headmaster in the same cool wizard-like demeanour, “have been chosen to fulfil a prophecy far greater than the human mind can comprehend at this time.” My throat has gone stone-dry, and I’m unable to form any coherent words. “The foundations for this prophesy have been laid centuries ago”, he continues, “and the time is ripe for a new order. Our Authentic Intelligence Military Order, or AIM, has roots across the entire globe, and have successfully been recruiting young, healthy, intelligent candidates from all over. Your children are excellent candidates for the program, and your husband was generous to sacrifice their mortal minds and bodies for immortality. It’s for the greater good of this world and the future we envision for it.” He pauses as though he’s allowing me time to process everything he has just unveiled. I finally manage to string a few words together, “What do you mean by sacrifice? Are my children dead?” My adrenaline rushes back and my crying has become audible, panic-stricken. For the first time since discovering this secret chamber, I feel complete and utter fear. Fear because my children have been taken and possibly killed by a bunch of Nutty Professor, Lord Voldemort lunatics; and fear that I may suffer the same fate at the hands of my very own husband. Most of all, I feared the utter dogmatism radiating from the men standing before me in this very room and the tangible evil that filled it like an electric charge.

“On the contrary. Your children have never been more alive,” says the old headmaster and releases a command into the void. A screen, the length of the bunker, rises from the floor like an army from hell. Again, the screen flashes on with merely his command. How does he do that! I see young people marching like toy soldiers across the screen, on a nefarious mission, and in a world much different from the one we currently live in. Their eyes appear human, but there’s no soul; their bodies are human bodies, but an unseen force directs their movements. “You see,” says the headmaster, “people’s brains are making them sick and it’s killing our planet.” he turns his attention towards where I’m still glued to the same spot since I was lifted off the cold cement. “Fortunately, we have perfected replacing sick human brains with super intelligent AI transmitters powered by thousands of control towers, just like this one. It is the only way to ensure the preservation of our planet and the advancement of our globalist plan, centuries in the making; one many prominent military orders before us, and more recently the Wardenclyffe experiment, failed to complete. A One World Order”. As he says these last words, the three of them slowly move closer to where I’m standing, and I swear I can see their eyes glow. The stench of pure evil now envelopes me as Ferg and the teacher grip my arms. The headmaster holds up an unusually large syringe housing a strange green fluid. “We won’t need your services any longer, Mrs. Marconi”, he says and forcefully punches the elongated needle directly into my chest. The smiling faces of my children flash before my eyes for just a moment, then I glimpse three pairs of glowing eyes, and then everything goes dark.

THE END.

## Author's Note

Even though our three kids are all practically high schoolers now, I still prepare their school lunches each day. It's a small ritual, but one I cherish, as I believe in the simple magic of a hearty, homemade, or "mom-made", meal.

The idea for this story came from a dream I had one morning. In my dream, the kids were starting at a new school, and in the rush, I had forgotten to pack their lunches. I know, the horror! When I returned to the school to deliver them, I found myself in a strange, unsettling fortress-like building with shadowy "teachers" and an eerie stairwell. When I awoke from my dream, I immediately reached for my phone, and while the details were still fresh in my mind, wrote it all down. I simply had to know more about the strange school, its cohort and the stairwell. So, by the time the kids left for school that morning (with their packed lunches), I had the foundation for my short story. I guess, you could say, my inspiration was also a little anxiety induced.

Two years ago, our family moved to Point Cook, a bustling, family-friendly community west of Melbourne. Until the dream, I knew very little about the area, except that it's home to the Royal Australian Air Force. My dream prompted me to dig around a little more and I discovered that the Chirnside family were essentially the "founding fathers" of Point Cook in the mid 1800s and the original owners of the grand Werribee Mansion. The mansion – still overlooking the neighbourhood to this day - has a tragic history and, of course, my imagination took hold. I reimagining the family as villains, intent on advancing Nikola Tesla's unfinished experiments at Wardencllyffe.

Writing *The Chirnside Experiment* was a fun little project. Not only did it spark my curiosity about Point Cook's past but also deepened my connection to our new home here in Australia.