

THE MEMORY THIEVES



The Memory Thieves tells the tale of children and teens living in the Elsewhere Sanctuary — a high-tech building where traumatic memories are removed by Dr Haven’s special methods. In the sample below, the story’s protagonist, Cyan, is introducing new girl Jonquil to the way the sanctuary “shuffles” as part of the doctor’s memory removal programme.

Extract from *The Memory Thieves*, pages 46–51

After passing the oak walls that hid the engine floor from the stairway, he hopped off the top step and hit the carpet of the upper rooms’ first floor.

Jonquil was waiting for him in a wide hallway — a cubeshaped space with dark, wood-panelled walls. She turned to take in its thick rugs and the colourful fish paintings on the walls, then looked at the doors facing each other from the room’s opposite ends. Each one of them had a small porthole window. “So I’m just going anywhere?”

“Anywhere. Makes no—”

She was off again.

Cyan trailed behind while Jonquil raced through hallways and up and down spiral staircases. Other residents sometimes had to hop aside, so that they bumped against tall plants and bronze lamps.

“Slow down!” panted Cyan. “Man alive — you’re really fast!”

Jonquil showed no sign of slowing. “Thanks! I used to be a—”

“Don’t...say more...”

“Sorry!”

“But seriously...slow down. Need...to show you...something.”

Jonquil stopped and Cyan stumbled into her. He stooped for some moments with his hands on his knees, so that his white fringe hung over his face. After getting his breath back, he straightened and patted his chest. “Right. Okay... While you were running, did you hear your locket beeping? Three separate times?”

“Yeah. There was one just now.”

“That’s the countdown. Five minutes left until the shuffle starts. Notice anything about the hallways and staircases you’ve been whizzing around? And the bedrooms you’ve seen through open doors. Anything they’ve all got in common?”

Jonquil studied the hallway they were in. “The walls are all wooden. And they all have the same shape. Like big cubes.”

“That’s right. The rooms are all cubes. That’s how it works — how the upper rooms move.”

“What?”

“You’ve seen those puzzles, right? The flat ones where you have to slide plastic tiles around to make picture.”

Jonquil eyed him cynically. “Yeah, I know the ones.”

Cyan used his fingers to make a square shape. “Now imagine one of those puzzles, but in 3-D. What would those moving tiles be in 3-D?”

“I guess...cubes?”

“Bullseye. And that’s how these bedrooms and hallways move around; like cubes in a giant sliding puzzle.”

Jonquil’s eyes searched the walls. “I don’t believe you.”

Cyan laughed and carried on. “And those cubes need a grid to move around in, right? That’s what this is part of.” His finger traced the room’s broad ebony trim, which skirted the twelve edges of the floor, ceiling and walls.

“This border is part of the upper rooms’ framework — the huge grid that holds all the cubes in place. It also lets the walls slide in all directions while the rooms — their floors and ceilings and whatever’s in them — go wherever they’re sent. So during a shuffle there’s stuff moving all over the place, but the framework stays put. That’s why it’s the safest place to be.

“So basically, if your locket tells you a shuffle’s coming and you’re up here, you need to get safely into the frame before it all kicks off. Here.” Cyan pointed at the hollows in each vertical section of the room’s frame. “These are called snugs, okay? They’re for residents and staff during shuffles.” Both of their lockets were beeping regularly now. “Quick, get into one.”

Jonquil shook her head. “This is ridiculous. You’re having me on.” Even so, and with a look of mounting worry on her face, Jonquil reversed cautiously into one of the snugs.

Cyan tucked himself into the opposite snug and gave her two thumbs up. “There’s nothing to worry about, Jonquil. You’re perfectly safe, as long as you stay in your snug. Have you noticed the beeping’s getting faster?”

Jonquil was as pale as she’d been before her hot chocolate. She nodded wordlessly.

“And you feel that faint trembling?” Cyan had to raise his voice while the noise grew louder. He could hear it travelling up from the engine floor, reverberating through the framework — the gnash of cogs, the squeal of pulleys.

Cyan’s heartbeat quickened. A laugh began to rise in his throat, but when it failed to reach his mouth he frowned. Something was sucking the joy out of this shuffle.

He pouted slightly, suddenly deep in thought. When he realized it was the message he’d found on the whale bones — that those words still niggled him more than he’d liked to admit — his frown deepened.

Jonquil shrieked across the rising din. “What is it?” Her eyes darted nervously left and right. “Is something wrong?”

Cyan pushed the thought aside. The walls thrummed and trembled around them, and he forced a giddy cackle through his lips. “It’s all great!” he shouted. “Just stay put ’til it’s over! Heeeeere it comes!”

Dose Six

Reconfiguration

The floor beyond the frame’s edge fell away, followed swiftly by the room’s descending ceiling. Cyan caught sight of Jonquil’s widening eyes, before a wall slid along the frame’s grooves to block his view. When it was gone, he managed to shout a quick, “It’s okay!” before another wall shot up from below.

Wooden walls — many of them with doors — flew by with increasing speed, from top to bottom and bottom to top, left to right and right to left. Cyan saw staircases, bedrooms and

hallways, all coasting through the space within the cube-shaped frame, most of them on the cusp of collision with sliding walls.

On it went with a thunderous rumble — with an exhilarating grind and relentless squeal. And with every passing room, Cyan glimpsed floors and ceilings, wardrobes and beds; beanbags and tables, mirrors and shelves; quaking plants and nodding lamps; fat bright cushions and vivid fluffy rugs... On and on, lurching and sliding, until the movements began to slow.

The noise gradually fell in volume, and when everything finally slotted into place, Cyan and Jonquil found themselves looking into a new hallway with a spiral staircase in its centre.

Task

In groups, imagine your school starts to “shuffle” the way the Elsewhere Sanctuary does. Write a short story about your escape from the school while it reconfigures all around you.

Darren Simpson’s Top Tips for writing an exciting story

- Look around you. Think about any rooms above, below, next to you and beyond. It may help to draw a rough map and plan how the rooms will move.
- Will the rooms start to shuffle straight away? A slower build-up will help raise the tension.
- Think about how you’ll feel when the building starts to shift. Are you scared? Confused? Excited? How does your body respond physically? Try to make the reader feel these things too.
- What does the shuffle sound like? What noises are any people around you making? Can you use sounds to add to the suspense?
- Decide which rooms you’ll have to run through. What objects and furniture are in these rooms? How will you get past them while you try to escape?
- Try to capture how the rooms are moving all around you as you run through them. Is it dangerous to move between them? Add some close calls to add to the excitement.
- Where will you end up when you finally escape the building? How will you feel?
- What does the shuffling school look like from the outside? Try to wow the reader with a visual spectacle.

We’d love to read some of your stories and know that Darren Simpson would too. Why not ask your parent or guardian to share them on social media and tag Usborne and Darren Simpson in them!