

Little Brother

By Cory Doctorow

I'm a senior at Cesar Chavez high in San Francisco's sunny Mission district, and that makes me one of the most surveilled (watched) people in the world. My name is Marcus Yallow, but back when this story starts, I was going by w1n5t0n.

Pronounced "Winston."

Not pronounced "Double-you-one-enn-five-tee-zero-enn"—unless you're a clueless disciplinary officer who's far enough behind the curve that you still call the Internet "the information superhighway."

I know just such a clueless person, and his name is Fred Benson, one of three vice-principals at Cesar Chavez. He's a sucking chest wound of a human being. But if you're going to have a jailer, better a clueless one than one who's really on the ball.

"Marcus Yallow," he said over the PA one Friday morning. The PA isn't very good to begin with, and when you combine that with Benson's habitual mumble, you get something that sounds more like someone struggling to

digest a bad burrito than a school announcement. But human beings are good at picking their names out of audio confusion—it's a survival trait.

I grabbed my bag and folded my laptop three-quarters shut—I didn't want to blow my downloads—and got ready for the inevitable. (**Inevitable:** something that cannot be avoided).

"Report to the administration office immediately."

My social studies teacher, Ms. Galvez, rolled her eyes at me and I rolled my eyes back at her. The Man was always coming down on me, just because I go through school firewalls (**Firewalls:** computer defense network) like wet Kleenex, spoof (**Spoof:** trick) the gait (**Gait:** the way you walk) -recognition software, and nuke (**Nuke:** destroy) the snitch chips (**Snitch Chips:** electronic tracking devices they track us with). Galvez is a good type, anyway, never holds that against me (especially when I'm helping get with her webmail so she can talk to her brother who's stationed in Iraq).

Marcus makes his way to the Vice Principal's office, but is distracted...

I was halfway there when my phone went. That was another no-no— phones are muy prohibido at Chavez High— but why should that stop me? I ducked into the toilet and shut myself in the middle stall. I checked the phone— my home PC had sent it an email to tell it that there was something new up on Harajuku Fun Madness, which happens to be the best game ever invented.

Marcus and his friends, Vanessa, Darryl, and Jolu, managed to get out of school to track down clues for Harajuku Fun Madness while searching for clues downtown they feel an explosion that rocks the entire city. Suddenly, loud speakers instruct everyone to get off the streets, so everyone streams down into the BART, the subway. Everyone is in a panic.

I was as scared as I'd ever been. There was screaming everywhere now, and more bodies on the floor, and the press from behind was as relentless as a bulldozer. It was all I could do to keep on my feet. Up ahead, I saw someone, a middle-aged lady in a hippie dress, falter and fall. She screamed as she went down, and I saw her thrashing to get up, but she couldn't, the crowd's

pressure was too strong. As I neared her, I bent to help her up, and was nearly knocked over her. I ended up stepping on her stomach as the crowd pushed me past her, but by then I don't think she was feeling anything.

We were in the open concourse where the turnstiles were. It was hardly any better here—the enclosed space sent the voices around us echoing back in a roar that made my head ring, and the smell and feeling of all those bodies made me feel a claustrophobia I'd never known I was prone to.

People were still cramming down the stairs, and more were squeezing past the turnstiles and down the escalators onto the platforms, but it was clear to me that this wasn't going to have a happy ending.

"Want to take our chances up top?" I said to Darryl.

"Yes," he said. "This is vicious."

I looked to Vanessa—there was no way she'd hear me. I managed to get my phone out and I texted her.

We're getting out of here.

I saw her feel the vibe from her phone, then look down at it and then back at me and nod vigorously. Darryl, meanwhile, had clued Jolu in.

"What's the plan?" Darryl shouted in my ear.

"We're going to have to go back!" I shouted back, pointing at the remorseless crush of bodies.

"It's impossible!" he said.

"It's just going to get more impossible the longer we wait!"

He shrugged. Van worked her way over to me and grabbed hold of my wrist. I took Darryl and Darryl took Jolu by the other hand and we pushed out.

It wasn't easy. We moved about three inches a minute at first, then slowed down even more when we reached the stairway. The people we passed were none too happy about us shoving them out of the way, either. By that point, I wasn't even thinking of helping anyone. All I could think of was finding the spaces in front of us to move into, of Darryl's mighty straining on my wrist, of my death-grip on Van behind me.

Marcus and his friends make it back up to the street, but quickly find that something is terribly wrong...

We moved for them, the sirens and the smoke making us duck and hunch our shoulders. We got as far as the benches before Darryl fell forward.

We all yelled and Vanessa grabbed him and turned him over. The side of his shirt was stained red, and the stain was spreading. She tugged his shirt up and revealed a long, deep cut in his pudgy side.

"Someone freaking *stabbed* him in the crowd," Jolu said, his hands clenching into fists. "That's vicious."

I whipped my phone out and punched 911. The sound I got wasn't even a busy signal—it was like a whimper of pain from the phone system. You don't get sounds like that unless there's three million people all dialing the same number at once.

"What about them?" Darryl said, and pointed at the street. I looked where he was pointing, thinking I'd see a cop or a paramedic, but there was no one there.

"It's OK buddy, you just rest," I said.

"No, you idiot, what about them, the cops in the cars? There!"

He was right. Every five seconds, a cop car, an ambulance or a fire truck zoomed past. They could get us some help. I was such an idiot.

"Come on, then," I said, "let's get you where they can see you and flag one down."

The first vehicle that screamed past—an ambulance—didn't even slow down. Neither did the cop car that went past, nor the fire truck, nor the next three cop-cars. Darryl wasn't in good shape—he was white-faced and panting. Van's sweater was soaked in blood.

I was sick of cars driving right past me. The next time a car appeared down Market Street, I stepped right out into the road, waving my arms over my head, shouting "STOP." The car slowed to a stop and only then did I notice that it wasn't a cop car, ambulance or fire-engine.

It was a military-looking Jeep, like an armored Hummer, only it didn't have any military insignia on it. The car skidded to a stop just in front of me, and I jumped back and lost my balance and ended up on the road. I felt the doors open near me, and then saw a confusion of booted feet moving close by. I looked up and saw a bunch of military-looking guys in coveralls, holding big, bulky rifles and wearing hooded gas masks with tinted face-plates.

I barely had time to register them before those rifles were pointed at me. I'd never looked down the barrel of a gun before, but everything you've heard about the experience is true. You freeze where you are, time stops, and your heart thunders in your ears. I opened my mouth, then shut it, then, very slowly, I held my hands up in front of me.

The faceless, eyeless armed man above me kept his gun very level. I didn't

even breathe. Van was screaming something and Jolu was shouting and I looked at them for a second and that was when someone put a coarse sack over my head and cinched it tight around my windpipe, so quick and so fiercely I barely had time to gasp before it was locked on me. I was pushed roughly but dispassionately onto my stomach and something went twice around my wrists and then tightened up as well, feeling like baling wire and biting cruelly. I cried out and my own voice was muffled by the hood.

I was in total darkness now and I strained my ears to hear what was going on with my friends. I heard them shouting through the muffling canvas of the bag, and then I was being impersonally hauled to my feet by my wrists, my arms wrenched up behind my back, my shoulders screaming.

I stumbled some, then a hand pushed my head down and I was inside the Hummer. More bodies were roughly shoved in beside me.

"Guys?" I shouted, and earned a hard thump on my head for my trouble. I heard Jolu respond, then felt the thump he was dealt, too. My head rang like a gong.

"Hey," I said to the soldiers. "Hey, listen! We're just high school students. I wanted to flag you down because my friend was bleeding. Someone stabbed him." I had no idea how much of this was making it through the muffling bag. I kept talking. "Listen—this is some kind of misunderstanding. We've got to get my friend to a hospital—"

Someone went upside my head again. It felt like they used a baton or something—it was harder than anyone had ever hit me in the head before. My eyes swam and watered and I literally couldn't breathe through the pain. A moment later, I caught my breath, but I didn't say anything. I'd learned my lesson.

If you'd like to find out how things turn out for Marcus and his friends, please visit:

[Cory Doctorow's website](#)

