

## THE HALLWAY

A single light shone against an encompassing sea of blackness. Tom cocked his head. He strained to see what lay at the far end of the long hallway, beneath that one dim light.

He blinked twice. A door? A black door?

The light flickered, then went out.

Oh, God, no!

He was plunged into darkness, total and absolute darkness.

Panic began chipping away at his strength, his courage. He turned, tried to get out the door behind him, the one he'd passed through only seconds ago. He pushed the door, rattled the knob.

Locked.

"Hey, Deke, open the door."

Silence.

"Deke, it's not funny. Open the door! Turn the damn light back on!" What was he doing in here? Why did he let his best friend talk him into going into the hallway? Why did Deke close the door behind him? All he'd said to him was, "Go on, Tom. We've got something special for you. You'll like it." Then he smiled and closed the door.

Deke had always been a practical joker. But, he knew Tom didn't like small, dark places. Didn't he? Deke was a friend. Wasn't he? A friend wouldn't have done this. A friend would have known, would have cared.

Whatever the reason, the "why" didn't matter anymore. He was here, in the dark. He could feel the walls and ceiling closing in around him. Unseen hands were surely reaching from out of the blackness, reaching out for him. Just inches from his face, he knew they would soon be on him, ready to...to...To what?

He slumped away from the clawing fingers he could feel were

surrounding him. "Deke, you bastard, open this door. Man, when I get out of here, I swear to God, I'm gonna kick your ass."

Silence surrounded him except for the rhythmic beating of his heart.

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

Like a kettle drum in his ears.

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

Louder, it was all he could hear. He put his hands to his ears, still...

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub.

He sank to the floor, peering between splayed fingers, yet saw nothing, only the crypt blackness around him.

Why? Why in hell did I do it? Why did I tell Deke I'd do it? Jesus, I...I gotta get out of here. Then the lone light at the far end of the hallway came back on. Against the darkness, it shined like a beacon. Its meager light forced the walls and ceiling back. It drove away the groping hands and their clawing fingers from his body.

A joint-numbing cold crept over him. It sent chills along the length of his spine. So cold. So dark. The cold broke through a layer of safe, warm memories he'd used for many years to insulate himself from his single most terrifying fear, a nightmare that had haunted him since his youth. Until now, his well nurtured and protected memories had worked to hold this nightmare at bay. In the cold, in the silent darkness, the terror crept back into his consciousness.

The cold took him back to that moment, to the core of his fears, his brother's funeral.

He'd told his mother he didn't want to look at Cory's body, but she made him do it anyway. He had to tell his older brother goodbye.

Standing next to the casket, he barely recognized Cory. His mother and father were wrong. He didn't look beautiful, didn't look like he was sleeping. He looked terrible, stiff like he was wearing a wax mask. As his parents sobbed,

Tommy stared down at the body, unwilling to believe it was Cory. His mother leaned down to kiss his cheek. As she did, Cory opened his ice blue, empty eyes.

He stared up at Tommy, eyes wide.

Tommy jumped. He looked at his mother, then his father.

Cory isn't dead. Don't they see it? Why don't they do something?

Cory's mouth moved slowly. A faint whisper escaped his waxed lips, "Tommy. You killed me."

"No," he screamed and turned away.

His father grabbed him and held him. "It's alright. Death is a natural thing. We all miss him, but there's nothing we can do."

"Dad!"

Cory's lips moved, "You killed me."

"Dad," Tommy pleaded, "don't you see?"

"You killed me," Cory repeated. "Why, Tommy. Why? You're my brother."

"No!" Tommy screamed between sobs.

His father wrapped his arm around him and guided him to their seat in the front row as his mother lingered at the casket. She kissed Cory, then joined them as the minister prayed.

From the open casket, Cory's monotone voice seemed to reverberate off the cold, gray walls of the mortuary, "You killed me. You killed me."

Tommy buried his face in his father's chest, held his hands over his ears and cried, "No, no." As his father comforted him, Cory's voice faded away.

At the end of the ceremony, the minister closed and locked the casket. The final thud sent a chill through Tommy's body.

Cory, locked forever in a cold, dark box. Everything he'd hated and feared was now his eternity. This would be even worse than the time Cory had locked himself in the refrigerator his father was fixing in their garage.

When Tommy and his mother returned from shopping, they heard a faint cry, a distant banging. After several minutes of searching, they found Cory, wide-eyed with fear and screaming uncontrollably. He'd torn off his fingernails trying to pry the door open. Blood was running down his hands and arms. When they opened the door, Cory ran to a hanging light in the center of the garage. He stared up at it and sobbed.

From that moment on, Cory couldn't stand tight, dark places. Now, they had just locked him into another dark box.

At the cemetery, as they held a brief service, his brother's muffled screams returned. They echoed off the trees and headstones, "No, Tommy. Don't let them put me in the ground. It's so cold, so dark. Stop them."

Tommy pulled on his father's arm, "Dad, don't you hear Cory?"

"Son," his father wrapped his arm around Tommy's shoulders. "Cory's gone. There's nothing we can do. He's gone."

"No, Dad. I can hear him."

"Tommy," his father said, this time with anger in his voice, "he's gone! He's dead. Do you hear me, he is dead."

He's dead. He's dead. He's dead.

The cutting words echoed through Tommy's mind as he ripped away his father's arm and ran as fast as he could. He had to get away. He hid behind an oak tree until everyone left. Then he sneaked back to watch the grounds keepers lower the casket into the ground. With each shovel of dirt the small tractor dumped on top of the casket, he felt Cory squirming as they buried him deeper and deeper. Colder and darker.

He'd never forgotten the moment they sealed Cory in forever. That terrifying memory had lingered just below his emotional surface ever since.

Back in the hallway, Tom focused all his thoughts on the light. He inched his way down the hallway, his back pressed flat against the wall. Cory's face flashed in his mind. His voice came back to him, that muffled voice from

inside the closed casket, "You killed me.

You killed me. Why?"

"It wasn't my fault," Tom whispered as he inched slowly down the hallway. "We were playing " The memory of the accident that killed Cory raced through his mind as if it happened only days ago.

He and Cory were playing on the railroad bridge over the river. It was dark, well past sunset. They were already late for supper, already in trouble, so they were in no hurry.

Tommy was throwing stones into the river when Cory jumped him from behind, gave him a push, then grabbed him and shouted, "I saved you." It was an old trick, but they each laughed.

As Cory turned and faced the river, Tommy pushed him. He had intended to grab him, but Cory's foot caught. He tripped and tumbled forward, over the railing, fifty feet into the darkness. His scream ended with the splash.

Tommy stood, too scared to move. When he could, he ran home. His parents were waiting at the door. "Mom, Cory slipped off the bridge. I tried to save him," he cried. "I tried," he cried to them.

The next day, the police dragged Cory's body out of the river, two miles downstream. When the police found Cory, his eyes were wide open, weeds and moss hung from his mouth.

From their observation point on the river bank, his father sobbed, "Oh, God, how could it have happened?"

Nearby, as Tommy listened, he tried to force the image out of his mind. He couldn't. He kept seeing Cory's body lying on the bank, his eyes open, trying to see beyond the black water. His mouth open, crying out against the cold.

The memory faded. Back in the hallway, Tom focused on the light at the end of the hallway, brought himself back to the real world. He pulled his collar tight against the cold.

Tom's thoughts drifted to his wife, Bev. He had tried to tell her about Cory, about what happened at the river and about his vision at the funeral. He had tried many times, but in the end he couldn't. How could he tell her he'd killed his own brother and condemned him to eternity in a dark box?

She never understood why he insisted on always having a nightlight on in the room, but she agreed. If he woke up in the dark, he'd begin screaming. He'd had a difficult enough time explaining why he insisted on having his body cremated after he died. He wanted his ashes spread over the Rocky Mountains, in as open an area as she could find. To spend eternity, locked away, underground? No!

Down at the far end of the hallway, the small light bulb was drawing him toward it. He tried to ignore the cold. If he could just keep moving, he told himself, he'd be there. He forced his feet to move. One step, then a second and a third step. That's it. Just keep moving.

Then, behind him. A scrapping noise.

His heart raced. The air became musty, dank.

He turned. He was afraid to see what was behind him, yet terrified not to see. The dim hall appeared empty. But, the noise?

He leaned to the side, cocked his head, straining to see, to hear.

Still nothing.

As he turned back, trying to convince himself he'd imagined the noise, that it was nothing, all in his mind, something on the floor caught his eye.

He leaned forward, knelt down.

Oh, Jesus! No! No! It can't be! It just can't be!

He stood, backed away. In the dark hallway, against a scratched and faded wainscoting, there was a small pool of water. In the water, a matted clump of grass, muddy grass.

"No!"

His eyes wandered nervously along the length of the shadowy hallway.

What was happening? Nothing made sense. The hallway was so dark, very cold.

"Cory?" Tom said with a thin, weak voice. "Cory, is that you?"

Silence.

"Cory?"

Silence.

The door. Gotta get to the door. Not far.

He ran. Within seconds, he reached it, the featureless black door. Above it, the light shined in a bare socket.

He grabbed the doorknob and turned.

Behind him. Sloshing. The stale, musty odor grew stronger. His hands were shaking. He tried to open the door, but it didn't move.

This isn't happening. It's not real. It is not real.

He grabbed the doorknob again.

Then, from behind, wet footsteps.

Open the door. Gotta open the door. Gotta get inside.

As much as he urged himself on, he couldn't move.

God, please.

He again tried to pull. Something touched his shoulder. His entire body shook. He managed to turn his head enough to see.

On his shoulder...NO! It can't be real.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. It dug its gray, decaying fingers into his skin. Bits of wet grass were hanging from it, falling to the floor. He turned more, looked along the length of the hand and arm.

Cory!

His long dead, older brother was standing behind him. His small, ten year old body seem limp below his neck and shoulders. Death had stretched the skin on his face, exposing a cadavered smile. His mouth moved with a mechanical, up and down motion. Brown water gushed forth as he spoke. It

ran down his chin and on onto his sodden sweater and jeans, the very clothes he was wearing those many years ago when he fell to his death.

In an emotionless, monotone, he said, "You threw me into the cold, black river. You let them lock me in that dark box. They put dirt over me and trapped me forever in the cold, dark ground. Why didn't you stop them? You were there. You watched it happen."

"Cory," Tom answered in a quaking voice, "I...I tried. They didn't...They didn't listen. Only a kid. My God, Cory, I...I really tried. I swear-"

"No," Cory said. The words came out machine-like, slow and measured. "You will share my darkness, share my cold. We will be together for eternity."

Tom turned and pulled on the door, it opened slightly.

Cory wrapped his decayed fingers around Tom's arm, began pulling him back.

Tom gagged on the stench. He felt his heartbeat in his neck and his temple, pounding harder and harder. With his free hand he jerked at the door. A sliver of light escaped from beyond.

Cory's fingers dug into his shoulder. He tried to scream. His throat locked. His heart throbbed one mighty beat, then burst. A burning pain knotted his chest and shot down his arm.

As the bright light from the room spilled over him, his wife rushed through the door and grabbed his hand. Fear was etched across her face. "Honey, I'm so sorry about the light. I didn't know what Deke was going to do, or I would have stopped him.

Are you okay?"

In his last seconds of life, a muted squeal slipped out of his mouth. His legs collapsed. He dropped to the floor.

His now widowed wife stared, unable to think, unable to scream.

From within the bright light, a roomful of voices shouted, "Surprise. Happy Birthday."



The End