

Lost in the Dark

There are places I do not go.

Bad places. Frightening places. And yet, despite my wishes, I sometimes end up there anyway.

Most of my time is spent creeping through the secret passages. My footsteps are quiet as any mouse's and I always try to keep myself small. Young as I am, that isn't too difficult. I don't remember if I'm six or seven. Sometimes my memory of things doesn't work very well. But I always remember the passageways. One trip is all it takes and I never forget. Once I know, I always recognize exactly where the secret doors are. Where the looking holes have been hidden so I can make sure the coast is clear for those times when I have to cross outside the walls.

This particular series of passageways and hidden doors was very familiar. And in this case that wasn't a good thing. If I followed one particular path, there was a strange man who lived at the apartments at the far end. A very angry man. And the passage itself tended to be a little on the tricky side.

Without really thinking about it I started down the passageway that led to the apartments. I'd done it before and for some reason I felt sure I would do it again. Closing the panel behind me, I stepped out of the wall passage and into the open hallway. Breathing a little faster, I walked quickly and silently around the corner and past the laundry chute. Next to it was a closet which I slipped into unnoticed. It was dark here but enough light filtered in from under the door and around the other seams for me to see what I needed to see. Someone had put some stuff on the floor that I had to carefully rearrange. I didn't want anyone knowing I'd been here but I had to move some stuff so I could open the panel beneath the bottom shelf. With a little luck, once I had passed through, everything would look the same as it had and they'd never know I'd been there at all.

As always, once everything was out of the way, the panel opened easily. You just pressed at the top and tugged at the knothole. The piece opened outwards on hidden hinges mounted to the right-side wall. Sliding my feet and then my legs through the opening, I felt the floor disappear beneath them. It was a long drop if I was to fall. But that would never happen. Reaching over the board that formed the wall, I rearranged the items back as closely as I remembered finding them. I then scotched back until I had one foot pressed against the back wall and another on the first rung of the ladder. Only then did I finish pulling the board closed again.

In here it was completely dark. But I knew the way well enough I didn't need light. Slowly and carefully, I began going down the ladder. This ladder was actually made for bigger people but I could use it well enough. After six rungs, I felt out with my foot across the empty space until I found the floor. The ladder ran up to the attic and all the way down to the sub-basement. I didn't need to go that far for this trip. I hopped off the ladder and onto the floor. A sort of hall was formed here in the area between walls.

Walking slowly, I held my hand out to my side to feel the boards I was passing. After feeling twenty, I turned to my right and edged slowly forward. There I began feeling around on the wall for the door knob I knew to be there. Finding it, I carefully turned it and peeked inside. While I was pretty sure no one remembered about this room, it never hurt to be careful. Once again I found it empty, so I stepped inside, easing the door closed behind me. With the door closed, it was practically invisible. This side of the door had no handle and nothing but almost invisible lines in the paneling

to show it was there at all.

This room never had much light but today it seemed brighter than usual. Most of the light came in from a mirror that covered most of one wall. At least it was a mirror on the other side. Here it was a dark glass that clearly showed the room beyond. As many times as I'd been here, I'd never seen anyone in that room either.

Not being in any particular rush, I looked around. On the table there was a crayon drawing on what had once been white paper. A yellow sun shining down on a blue house with green people standing next to it. A mommy, a little boy, and a little girl. There was a raggedly cutout place where someone else had stood. A bit uneasy, I set it back down. The little boy in that picture always reminded me of myself for some reason.

With a smile I spotted a small, faded box of candy that I vaguely remembered leaving over in the far corner of the room. Sitting down, I happily ate it all. Leaving the empty box where I'd found it, I was getting ready to walk to the panel that would slide into the wall behind. It would come out behind a tapestry in another room. However, on my way to it, I noticed something.

A feather.

It was longer than my hand and white. The feather rested on the floor behind one of the boards that ran up that wall. I'd never seen any birds here. Just a few rats and mice. Frowning in puzzlement, I picked up the feather.

It was very light. Up close, it was so white it almost glowed. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen anything that wasn't faded out or dust covered. I swished the feather through the air a few times and smiled. I wanted to keep it so I set the feather next to the box of candy in the corner. Not feeling hungry, I ignored the candy and set the strange feather across the box. My smile faded as I turned and re-crossed the room.

Opening the sliding door from this side was easy. I pressed the button and it glided smoothly and silently into the wall. This left me looking at the back of a tapestry. A knight on a horse about to be eaten by a dragon. I didn't like the picture much. Stepping through, I quickly moved away from the tapestry. Only then did I walk over to the wall with all the strange rocks.

The rocks were black and had lots of holes in them. They formed a section of wall off to the left. I didn't remember ever having seen rocks like these anywhere else. Putting my fingers in two of the lower holes, I stretched as high up as I could before I was able to reach the third hole. Pressing all three at once closed the sliding door. While it opened slowly enough, when it closed, it closed fast. Using the rocks meant not getting my arm hit by the door or caught in it. I still jumped a little when the door whooshed shut. And now that the door had closed this left me in one of the regular rooms. Unlike most open rooms, this was actually the safer place compared to the next leg of the trip. The next series of passageways were the ones that led to the strange man's apartments. A little shiver of fear ran through me but a stronger curiosity burned within me. I hadn't been there for a while. I wanted to see the place again.

Easing out into the hallway, I listened carefully but heard no one. So far so good. On silent feet, I walked through the hall and across into a large room filled with animal heads mounted to the wall. I didn't really care for this room either. Sometimes the eyes of the animals followed me. Today was one of those days. Perhaps they were upset by all the dust gathering on them or the cobwebs between their horns or teeth. I didn't know. Feeling very uncomfortable in front of all those angry, dead animals, I hurried across to the fireplace. There hadn't been a fire here in a long, long time.

On the right side, where the shelf over the fireplace met the stones of the fireplace, there was

a place with a gap. Pressing the stone inside that gap unlocked the door at the back of the fire pit. Pushing the door itself open required some serious effort. It was heavy and didn't slide very well. But I was determined and eventually, it opened enough for me to squeeze in behind it. Then I had to push it closed behind me. From this side it closed easily enough; a fact I was most thankful for.

And this placed me in another dark passage. Turning away from the fireplace, I slowly walked forward. Like a lot of the secret passages, this section didn't look like it had been finished. After fifteen paces, I stopped and knelt down. Lifting some of the insulation off the wall on my left revealed a gap in the wall. It was narrow and low to the floor. Squeezing through the hole in between the upright boards, I started crawling forward again. I had to go very slowly here. If I crawled too fast, I'd stir up the dust. The dust was bad everywhere but it was especially thick here. This close to my goal, I did not want to start sneezing. So, I crawled for a long time barely moving at all. Eventually, I reached the wall at the end of this dusty space.

This side of the wall was more finished than everything else around it. And here, a section of the wall covering was missing. Looking down through the hole into the space between walls, I could see a faint light. That was it. The apartment. But I still had a lot of work ahead before I got there.

Between the wall I was in and the next wall, there wasn't much space. Rolling over, I reached up into the open space between walls and grabbed a crossboard. With some effort I used the board to help me sit up. This put my legs still in the wall while my head and body were now in between the walls. Still holding the board, I twisted to the side a bit as I pulled my right leg out into the gap area. This was pretty awkward, so I felt around with my foot until I found another crossboard for it to rest on. I then twisted around the other way so I could pull out my other leg. That felt better. I didn't worry too much about people chasing me through most of these areas. Big people couldn't fit into them.

As I started climbing down, my foot slipped and I fell. Crashing to the floor below knocked the wind out of me and stirred up the dust. Stunned as I was, I still pulled my shirt up over my nose and mouth. Hopefully, falling hadn't made much noise. Hopefully. However, I knew sneezing certainly would.

Hurting from my fall, I slowly sat up and then stood up. As the dust settled, I pulled my shirt back down. With a little luck the man wouldn't be here anyway. He seldom was. However, if he did happen to be in, I'd just watch him for a while through the concealed opening.

If he hadn't heard me fall.

Rubbing my aching back and my arm, I slowly walked over to where the light filtered through the wall. There was a vent low in the wall I could see through. The silvery stuff normally found behind such vents had been torn away and hung to the side. Gingerly laying down, I looked through the thin metal bars. On the other side I could see the very small, sparsely furnished apartment. I found no sign the man was there.

Still, I sat listening and watching for a while... just in case he was in the bathroom or something. A lot of dust had accumulated in the apartment. On the floor were a few coins but they were of no real interest. After a while, I decided he wasn't here.

Sidling over to my left, I came to a whitish board on the other side of the regular boards. It would break if I wasn't careful how I pushed. And I did need to push it. So gently, I pressed a little at the top, then a little lower and lower and lower still. The vertical board of sheetrock was now open all along the left side for about an inch. It wasn't glued in or nailed, it had just been squeezed into place. Carefully, I continued pushing it back out of place. After a several minutes slow work, it was

turned completely sideways. Good enough. I squeezed my way out into the small pantry.

Silently, I opened the pantry door. Still no one other than me here. So far, so good.

On quiet feet, I edged out into the room.

As I'd seen earlier, there was hardly anything here. On one wall sat a ratty old sofa. It had a white sheet partly draped over it and a pillow on one arm. The outside door stood next to it. On the other side of that door was a cracked window that provided the room's only light source. The only other furniture here was an old kitchen table. I avoided it for the moment and walked over to the sofa.

On the floor in front of the sofa were scattered various photographs. They were faded but they still held more color than just about anything else. The top picture was of a baby. All babies were good for was making noise and messes. I dropped it back into the pile. The next picture I picked up showed a man and a woman in swim suits at a beach with blue water and white sand. Frowning, I dropped it, too. The next picture showed a man in a fancy suit standing in front of a big building. Uncomfortable, I dropped this picture as well.

Another picture caught my eye and I grabbed it. This one was a little girl building a sand castle. Only after it was happening did I notice I was smiling. I could almost hear the waves. I could almost hear her laughing. Seeing it made me want to go play with her.

Eventually, my smile faded away and I set the picture back down. I picked up another at random. This one showed the man and a woman holding a baby. They seemed very happy. I dropped it quickly and chose another at random.

This picture showed a woman cooking. She was always cooking. She wanted to write a cookbook and make some extra money. She'd buy us toys and candy with some of it. I realized she was the same woman from the other pictures. My lips silently formed the word 'Mama'. I felt a tear slide down my cheek. I missed her a lot.

Eventually, I put the picture down. Closest to me was a picture showing the man, the woman, a little boy and a little girl. They were standing in front of a house. A new house. Frightened, I stood up and walked away quickly.

Next to the pantry was a sink, a counter, and the kitchen table. I turned my eyes away from the table but that resulted in me looking at the knife drawer. There was dried blood on it from where it had dripped and run down the front. Turning away quickly from that, left me looking directly at the table.

It was an old fashioned table. The legs were chromed and so was everything else but the very top. The top was a faded turquoise color. The plastic top was patched with gray tape in a couple of places. It didn't look bad but the table still frightened me. Scared me worse than the pictures had. I began backing towards the door.

Beneath the table, I noticed a doll. There was a cut across the doll's middle. Shaking my head, I continued backing towards the door. Blood began dripping off the top of the table. The cut across the doll began bleeding as well. No. Enough blood dripped off the table that it formed a pool. The doll's mouth opened in a silent scream as began dripping out of the corner of it's mouth.

I ran out the door.

For a while I played with some of the other kids. We played underground, where the pipes all came together. The room wasn't very big but it was brightly lit by the two storm drains above.

Some of these children I'd seen before and some of them were new. They were all different sorts, some were black, brown, and white. Some were oriental or Indian. We were all close to the same age though. Adults and bigger kids wouldn't have been able to fit into the tunnels and pipes.

Mostly we played games and didn't talk much. We occasionally played games that required leaving the room but not often. Hide and seek almost always resulted in kids getting lost.

I did talk to my friend Suki some though. It had been a while since we'd last talked but she looked the same. She was very pretty with straight, black hair. When we walked, we were almost exactly the same height. We talked about games and foods that we liked or hated. She'd never heard of the television shows that I used to watch so I spent a lot of time explaining the good ones to her. In return, she explained some plays she'd watched to me. Some of them sounded pretty good. Later, she talked about becoming a doctor. She wanted to help people feel better which I thought was nice. I told her that I thought being a fireman would be neat. I remembered having a toy fire truck but I didn't know where it was any more. Lost I supposed. She thought that would be a very noble job.

Play time never lasted as long as I'd like. All too soon I was back in the walls.

Someone was hunting me. Moving silently through narrow gaps in the wall, I tried not to even breathe lest the noise attract the man who was after me. I wasn't sure just who it was who was actually after me at the moment. I hadn't actually seen whoever it was. I'd heard their soft steps though. I had to be very careful. If I made noise getting away from this person, it would almost certainly attract the angry man to the area.

Ooh, I really hated this wall. There were lots of nails sticking through along with really itchy insulation.

A voice called out to me. Taking a small breath, I began moving through the unpleasant section. Nails scratched me several times but I didn't cry. Instead, I continued a slow and steady pace through the narrow wall. Thankfully, it opened into a slightly wider area in between other walls. Turning to the right, I snuck down to a place where one of the walls had several looking holes. Standing on my tip toes, I slowly pulled the little bar that opened the hole and looked through.

There was a man in the room beyond. The angry man. As I watched, he looked behind the desk. Shaking his head, he walked over and looked behind a series of wooden panels with pictures on them.

Yep, he was looking for me.

From outside the wall someone called my name. The man looked up suddenly... afraid. *He* was scared. Moving quickly but quietly, he stepped through the door leading into the next room. However, when he closed the door behind him, he made some noise.

A moment later the other door opened. Into the room stepped a young woman. She looked a little bit like my old babysitter, except this woman was prettier. And she was clean as were her clothes. She called my name and I realized that it had been her calling me all along. The man had been hunting me. And now for some reason this woman was looking for me, too.

"Peter?" she called again. "Please come out. I'm not going to hurt you or let anyone else hurt you. This I swear. Please Peter, your mother needs to see you." I felt my eyes open wide in surprise. My lips framed the word 'Mama' but no sound came out. She looked through the room briefly and then walked through the door the man had gone out. She continued calling.

Who was this strange woman. And how did she know.... No, she must be lying. She didn't

know Mama. Mama was gone. Had been gone for a long time now. I silently slipped into the next passageway. At least the angry man wouldn't be following me for a while.

"Oh, bloody hell, this is frustrating!" Sandra declared before throwing herself into the overstuffed chair by the fireplace.

"Isn't it just," the older woman agreed. "The failures burn... but the rewards for success. There's simply nothing that compares."

"So far I'm stuck with mostly burning failures," Sandra sighed.

"Chin up," Rose told her with a knowing smile. "You'll get there. You've got the patience, the empathy, and the stubbornness. You just need a bit of luck to go with it."

"I know. And I'm still feeling frustrated."

"Did you come close?" Rose asked, suspecting that Sandra would feel better if she talked about it.

"Yes, I did actually," the younger woman replied, sitting up. "Peter touched the token I left. I was able to later use that contact to close in on his location. Justin was there as well. I actually caught a couple of glimpses of him. Probably stalking Peter again."

"Was there blood dripping off his hands?"

"Hmm? No, I don't think so. He certainly didn't leave any bloody fingerprints or anything. I'm pretty sure they looked reasonably clean but it was only a couple of quick glimpses."

"When I was actively on the case I had a couple of times when I followed Justin around hoping he'd lead me to the boy. So far as I was concerned, Peter was the one who needed rescuing. The father was pretty much a lost cause to me. Anyway, when he's feeling guilty, Justin's hands are usually covered in blood. Disgusting as it may be, that's probably the best time to try talking to him. When they're not, he's usually angry. Have a care then. Despite what you've learned and the training you've received, Justin is a very dangerous man. You know the strength of his psychoses... do not make the mistake of underestimating him."

"No, I won't underestimate him," Sandra replied with a firm jaw and a hardness of the eyes that caught Rose a little off guard. "But neither will I forget that I am the cat and he the rat. The analogy doesn't work for Peter though." She laughed humorlessly. "He's like trying to catch fog with the bare hands. I never imagined that one little boy could be so hard to find."

"I know dear. From most bitter experience I truly know. Thankfully, Peter and Justin are unusual. Most souls start off in the spirit world. Few are the ones who manage to catapult themselves straight into Limbo."

"Except it wasn't them doing the catapulting. It was Justin dragging the boy with him," Sandra replied bitterly.

"Yes. A very sad situation. But you'll catch one or both of them and then we can begin to set matters straight."

"I certainly hope so," the younger woman frowned. "Has there been any change with the mother or daughter?"

"The daughter is responding more and more. Not so much with the mother. Peter might her only hope for a recovery."

"Raphael's people are the best," Sandra said quietly. "To be honest, I'm surprised they're making any progress with the little girl. She was a total shell case when I saw her and her mother just

prior to taking this assignment.

“Changing the subject slightly,” Sandra began, “Did you ever feel sorry for Justin? I admit, I have on a couple of occasions. He looks so lost. So alone. And he is both of those. Probably more than he even realizes.”

“Early on I did,” Rose admitted perhaps a bit grudgingly. “I saw the same looks you’ve seen. But I also saw the horror etched on Sallie’s face and the shock on little Muriel’s face. I saw how they failed to respond. And of course there’s Peter. Trying to catch fog with one’s bare hands. Good analogy that. You’ve made more progress already than I ever managed on that front. I caught two fleeting glimpses of the boy in my whole time looking for him. Only two. And I blame Justin for that as well. So, while I did feel a bit sorry for him briefly, the aftermath of his crimes have burned away any compassion I might have felt for him.”

The younger woman nodded. “I understand exactly how you feel.” Standing, she walked to the door and partially opened it. “I’m going to get some rest and then go visit friends and family for a bit. Recharge myself. Then I’m going back into the house and I’m going to catch fog.”

“Well said!” Rose cheered.

“Thank you,” Sandra smiled. “But words are much easier than the actual task in this case. While I’m thinking about it, let me ask, did you ever find out which of them constructed the mansion?”

Rose nodded. “I spoke with Osiel not long ago. He went out and looked at the place with me. According to him, it’s a multi-point generation. The first portion was made by a Patrice Wittingham. Her husband was a big game hunter. She’s since found peace but while she was there she put a lot of focus into the place. A lot of energy. Other’s who’ve found the place have added their particular bits and pieces to it.”

Sandra nodded excitedly, “Yes! That makes sense. That’s why we’ve had such a hard time finding Peter. He’s attuned to the mansion. Much more so than Justin. That’s why Justin can’t find him either. And now I know.”

“You still gonna take some time off?”

Sandra frowned for a moment before nodding. “I know myself well enough to know when I’m approaching my limits. And right now I’m very close to the edge. I’ve no intention of joining them in their nightmare. No. Once I’ve recharged a bit, I’m going to go back. Then I’ll bring one or both of them back.”

“I do admire your fire, girl. And I’ll admit that I’m a bit envious of your wisdom. You’ve done a marvelous job of pacing yourself. You’ve gone further and gotten there faster than I ever did with the Stowe family.”

“And without you learning everything you did, it would have taken me much longer to do so,” Sandra replied with a serious smile. “Don’t sell yourself short Rose. Maybe you too should go visit family and friends for a while.”

“No. Not yet,” Rose replied with an absent wave of her hand. “I’m going to show the new girl what we do. Maybe take her on a run by the playground. See if young Marion and I can’t talk one of our wild ones into coming in from the dark.”

Out in the halls I can hear the man yelling for me. From the way he nearly screams my name I know he’ll hurt me if he catches me. Slowly, I crawl away from the sound of his voice. The sound

of his voice slowly fades. Eventually, quiet returns. For a while. Soon enough, he'll come looking for me again.

I stop at the entrance to a small side passageway. This one eventually leads to a tunnel that comes up in the cemetery. A dangerous place that. Sometimes the angry man goes there and smears blood across some of the stones while he cries. It's been a while since I've been there. Taking a deep breath, I start down this side passageway.

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