

Toy-box Memories

The interrogation had been rigorous and he was feeling exhausted by the time it finally ended. Why this information was so important, James had no idea, but against his better judgment he shared anyway. He unlocked the memories he'd kept locked up and hidden away, to maintain his no longer normal life.

The damning memories now free, crept back into his mind and as Porter's voice drifted to the background as James fell asleep, he dreamed.

James sat in his neat and tidy room, working on homework after returning from school with his older brother, Dell. James looked over the packet of homework from his third grade class and grimaced. Math problems and science reading tonight. Being in gifted classes sucked, and he missed the days where the packet was for the week and not one night.

The sounds from the kitchen downstairs announced Dell's whereabouts. He was moving back and forth between working on his school project and getting dinner ready like usual. Their father wasn't home yet, but usually arrived within the hour so they would be eating dinner soon. It was after all, their father's week to visit with them, and their mother was out of town on business anyway...so it was better than a babysitter. James looked over his homework again and sighing, closed his door and sat down to begin the reading assignments and take notes on it.

Finishing his reading homework, James looked at the clock on his wall...it had been almost two hours since he started reading, but he didn't remember hearing anything from Dell. His father hadn't come up to tell him dinner was ready either. Looking over to his door as he chewed on his pencil, James remembered that he'd closed it. Probably couldn't hear them...maybe his father was late from work. Shrugging, James got up and opened the door to listen for Dell down in the kitchen.

The house was silent.

That was unnerving...the house was never this quiet when he and his brother were there to visit. Usually the radio or the television would be heard from downstairs as his father and brother finished making dinner. There was nothing, no clanging of pots or pans being washed, no laughing at stupid jokes, and no calling for him to come to dinner. It got to him that everything was so quiet but stubbornly, James pushed those thoughts aside and went to the stairs to investigate. The door was

visible from the top, and it was open. Pressing his teeth together, James started down the stairs and looked over both sides for a sign that maybe his brother and father was playing a prank on him and trying to scare him. He hated being scared, and hated even more that Dell enjoyed doing it so much. He was too much like their father...their mother always scolded him for it.

“Okay Dell, quit being a jerk and come out already. Dad’s gonna be annoyed that you left the front door open again.” James said, walking down the rest of the stairs and turning the corner to the kitchen. He looked around and saw the counter a mess, and food all over the floor. Dell’s school project was there too, and it had been shredded, but he didn’t see Dell anywhere. Taking a step into the messy kitchen, James looked around cautiously before his foot slid out from under him, and the back of his head met the hardwood floor. Stunned and now groaning from the unexpected and painful fall, James looked down to his feet to see what he slipped in. It was dark...wine? It couldn’t be wine..their father didn’t drink...he was religious and kept a mandatory dry house. There was a trail of it, leading around the counter next to the kitchen entrance, and James felt his body go cold when he found the source. Just out of view of the corner of the counter, Dell lay on the floor with blood pooled beneath him. He was still, and quiet. “Dell?” James called, hoping his brother was just playing another prank on him but, looking at him closer, saw the gash across his throat and the kitchen knife in his back. Backing away, James covered his mouth and stifled the urge to scream in fear. Someone had killed his brother, and they could still be there. He had to get out.

Slam!

James yelped in fear, at the unexpected sound and whipped around just in time to see his father’s body fall to the floor behind him. His father’s clean light blue work shirt was drenched in blood, and the back of his head was smashed in. James could feel the last strand of hope and composure snap when a large dark person stepped over the body and examined it for a moment. Turning towards James and focusing on him next, James was horrified by what he saw.

They had no face.

All he could see was a dark figure...but no features at all.

Looking around for any other way to escape, now that the murderer blocked the door out of the kitchen,

James was nearly hyperventilating. He looked down at his brother again, and then back to his father...they were both gone and there was no one to save him now.

Seeing the breakfast bar, James bolted for and leaped over it before tumbling into the walkway near the front door. The tears came strong now, and his wrist hurt after he'd landed on it. It was broken, but the adrenaline of terror overshadowed the pain he should feel. He was only a few feet away from the front door now...it was his chance to escape. Running towards the door, James felt something cold and painful enter the back of his shoulder. He collapsed to the floor, and looked at the door as the dark figure stepped over him and closed it...guarded it.

James felt blood run down his arm and cried at the pain that cut through his shoulder. Struggling to sit up, he pushed himself away slowly, the weight on his broken wrist making the injury worse. Pushing himself to his feet, James stood dizzily and felt sick but, pushed himself to run. He had to escape, had to find a phone and call for help. He ran blindly to the back of the house and found himself in their father's room. His cell phone sat on the nightstand, and James took it without a second thought. Looking around, he climbed into the old toy-box that he used to own. His father took it out of his room, after the hinges became too sticky to reliably open. What his father didn't know about the toy-box, was that it had a secret door on the back that could be removed from the inside. He'd found it one day while getting toys out.

Climbing into the toy-box, James breathed heavily and closed the top over him. He was relieved that he still fit inside, and moving the secret door off the back, he saw the vent on the wall. He was trapped, not because the vent was there...because it was taller than the box. He wouldn't have the strength to kick it in. Quickly he dialed 9-1-1, and spoke as calmly as he could through the terror of footsteps coming down the hall. He managed to get his address out, and that someone was trying to kill him before the murderer entered the room and he hung up. Struggling against passing out, and curling up, James shivered with the cold of his blood running down his arm and the memory of Dell and his father dead.

The footsteps were soft against the carpet and seemed to be getting farther away, James peeked through the sliver of the lid and saw the murderer discovered the open window in the room. His father always left it open and if not for the next moment, it might have saved James. The phone suddenly rang back next to James and seconds later, a large knife came down barely inches away from him. He let go and shrieked as he tried to push himself as flat against the bottom of the box as he could get. The knife

sliced into his knees and cut into his arms as the murderer chopped their way into the box.

It suddenly stopped and voices could be heard.

“Time’s up.”

“The experiment isn’t completely resolved.”

“Return anyway, the data collected is enough for now.”

Silence.

James couldn’t hear anything else now but the sound of his breath and looking through the shredded toy-box, he saw the figure disappear. His body was at its limit, he was in pain all over, and exhausted from the overload of terror and adrenaline driving him. Looking himself over, and seeing all the blood, James fainted just as sirens announced the approach of salvation.

The Shortest Route

Four years since barely surviving the attack on his father's home that left him the only survivor, James was nearly ready to enter high school, he was now the age Dell was when the terror happened. Their mother took the news hard, and immediately began sending him to therapy...said he should focus on healing.

They'd moved away after the funeral. His mother, who never spoke again of the incident...or of Dell and his father, had her job transfer them far away. James knew why though. The scars from his experiences were enough to remind her of what happened. That and how she'd been advised to put him on antipsychotics after what transpired at the hospital and school for several weeks after. After he'd regained consciousness, he was hysterical and insisting a dark figure with no face was the murderer. He'd become severely agitated when they probed him for description. His insistence only led to them running mental health tests on him, and trying to find a diagnosis. Nothing except what they already knew: anxiety, depression, and the PTSD.

He'd changed schools in the middle of that year, when they moved and that was where the trouble started. He was in fights and though his grades hadn't slipped at all, he was noticeably less amicable with his teachers and the counselor they assigned, on his mother's insistence and against his wishes.

She was far too obsessed with trying to fix him, and they fought about it all the time. He wished she'd just let him be...and get through what the last four years had only made worse.

At least, the school year was over for now...he was going to spend time with his grandparents. It came as a welcome relief from the constant annoyance of having his mother on his ass. He missed Dell and his father, but he couldn't shake the resentment of the situation, them dying left him in.

After losing the fight to keep him under her watchful eye for the summer, his mother in defeat allowed him to go. However, she chose the method of travel and decided he'd be flying there. James of course argued against this...ever since the toy-box he'd been unable to deal with closed in spaces. Airplanes made him nervous because he felt like he was trapped, and his anxiety would have him breathing into a paper bag before the flight even took off. He knew she couldn't have forgotten what happened the last

time she had him on a plane. He had a massive anxiety attack, and had to be removed.

When he brought up the issue, his mother sighed and handed him a bottle of medication and a bullshit line.

“You’ll deal with it. Flying is the shortest route...3 hours in the air isn’t going to kill you. Make sure you pack enough clothes for the month, and let me know when you’re ready so we can be on time. We’re leaving tonight, I already bought the tickets.” Nearly snatching the bottle from her hand, James muttered a few swear words as he turned and headed to his room. Although he was frustrated about flying, and the amount of control his mother demanded over him for the last four years, he was happy to be getting away to see his grandparents for a while.

Settling nervously into the plane seating that night, James had a backpack under his seat and fidgeted with his ticket. His mother handed him money and took off towards her own flight an hour earlier and he was left on his own.

Looking around at the half full plane, James hoped it didn't fill up...that would only add to the claustrophobic conditions. The plane took off half an hour later and soon he was in the air, breathing through a bag to stop the panic attack he was starting to suffer...but not because of the reasons he expected to be.

The co-pilot was frantically trying to maintain control of the plane after the captain had a heart attack just an hour into the flight. He’d made the announcement that all passengers remain seated until further notice. The flight attendants were taking their own seats and things seemed to be moving smoothly until the plane suddenly began losing altitude. The feeling of the plane dropping so quickly made him queasy, and afraid to look out of the window.

He fainted before it hit the ground.

Waking up, he saw a flight attendant kneeling beside him in concern. Looking around, James saw the plane and everyone on it was fine.

Just a nightmare.

“Are you alright? Do you need some water?” He asked, when he saw James regained consciousness and was shaking off the confusion. James shook his head and looked away to the window, pulling down the shutter.

With his feet finally on the ground again, James breathed a sigh of relief and waited where his grandmother was supposed to meet him. James didn't feel comfortable flying, and hated taking the sedative because it caused nightmares.

In the car, he watched the landscape go by as his grandmother drove them away from the airport. He was excited to not have people all over him about every little detail of his life...he could visit his father and brother's graves in peace, spend some quality time with relatives, and just enjoy life. The road was quiet and peaceful as they drove alongside the mountains. Looking out to the valley below, James smiled a little at the reminder of the night sky's sparkle when they weren't near the city. It was perfect, and admiring it, he fell asleep finally relaxed and feeling safe for the first time since before he got on the airplane.

James woke up in agony. So much of him hurt that he couldn't even pinpoint where the start of it was. There was a loud blaring sound that pierced his ears, but he could barely move and couldn't find the source. It was dark, so dark that he couldn't see anything, and his head swam with the noise, pain, and dizziness. Trying to move in the slightest, had James breathless from screaming in further agony.

Trying to calm himself down from the pain, James realized he'd bit his tongue when he tasted blood in his spit.

How long had he been unconscious? Where was his grandmother and where was he for that matter?

Trying to sort these things out made his head throb, and he felt himself losing consciousness again.

The next thing James knew, he opened his eyes to a dim room and found himself unable to move...the pain was gone but he couldn't move and his grandmother was still nowhere to be seen. The only thing he knew for certain, was that his chest hurt immensely and he felt like he'd been hit by a train, had it back up and hit him again.

Trying to look around again, he realized that everything was blurry, this confused him, until he heard a voice speak to him.

“James? It’s grandpa Jerry...are you okay?” He spoke, leaving James in a state of confusion as he tried to look over towards the voice, and heard a beeping sound. Moments later, he heard a door open and an unfamiliar female voice.

“James...do you know where you are?”

James heard the voice and could make out a blurred face now staring down at him. He shook his head and flinched at the pain.

“You’re in the hospital, you and your grandmother were brought here after a car accident.”

James would’ve been terrified but, all he could show was confusion. He didn’t remember any accident happening. He just remembered waking up in pain in a dark place and then being in the dim room.

“Is she okay?” James croaked, hearing how raspy his voice was for the first time and being surprised by it.

“She’s resting in a different room, her injuries were not as serious as yours when you were brought in and she can go home in a few days.”

The doctor looked across James, to whom he assumed must’ve been his grandfather and began discussing what the next plan of action was now that he was awake.

What did that mean? Now that he was awake?

“What do you mean, now that I’m awake...” James swallowed to clear his dry throat and asked, “Wasn’t the accident just last night?”

The doctor looked at James and his grandfather stood, grasping his hand before answering him gently. “No son, the accident was just shy of two weeks ago now. You were severely injured, we thought you

weren't going to make it."

James' eyes widened and began burning with the advent of tears. "Does mom know? What happened?" He whispered, afraid at the news he was given.

"Yes, she knows. She's aware of your condition and we all decided it would be best for you to remain here at least until you're healed up. The rescue said that your seatbelt buckle failed and you nearly went through the windshield."

Looking at the doctor and then at his grandfather again, James was at a loss for words. He couldn't remember any of this happening...or how they'd been in the accident in the first place. "The doctor wanted to talk to you about what we can do to help...you broke a lot of bones in the accident and it's going to take a lot of work to get you fixed up." His grandfather explained, as James squeezed his hand tightly and looked at him concerned but tried to smile.