

Troll

Short Horror Tale No.9

By
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It was 9:05 PM when my iPhone received the panicky email from David Marshel.

I tried to call him five times during the next half-hour. Each time, he either didn't pick up or wasn't near enough to his phone to hear it ring.

By 10 PM, I was in my car, starting a four hundred mile journey back to the city of my birth.

The man who had been one of my best friends when I was six, and right through every day of my school life, was in trouble. We had stopped speaking to each other on his twenty-fourth birthday, some eight years ago – but I forgot all those silent years when I heard he needed help. I doubt very much that he would have done the same for me, but loyalty has always been one of my strongest characteristics, and one of my heaviest burdens.

The email had read:

'Steve, I think Tom's in deep shit.' I could have guessed the message was from David just by the perfect punctuation – the emails I get from most other people are encoded into gibberish. "He's locked up in that house of his. Won't see anyone. Won't answer the phone... And he's been acting really weird over the last few months. Could be on drugs again or it could be something worse. The last time I saw him, he was all hazy and strange, and talking about killing himself. I thought it was drunken bullshit talk... But now, I dunno. I'm scared. I think you're the only one who could get through to him. Maybe you can make him see sense and get into rehab again. I know you two haven't spoken for ages, but please come and try. Please, Steve, get down here fast."

I had no choice. I got down there fast.

* * *

It's amazing how much some people change during their school years.

My earliest recollections are of being a small, skinny kid who the bullies loved to pick on. I was quiet and usually sick most of the time – everything from flu to chicken pox, with just brief healthy spells in-between. When a new kid was added to the class, from a family who had just moved in from LA, he quickly became my best friend. Tom Howard was big and tough-as-nails. He fought the bullies off and changed my life for the better.

The strange thing was, Tom and I weren't alike at all. I was a white kid, into old Rock'N'Roll music, building model aeroplanes and learning about anything mechanical or electrical. Tom was black and a hardcore rap enthusiast, who ate like a horse and was fond of just lazing around. Most people couldn't understand how the two of us ever got to be buddies. Part of it was because we had a similar sense of humour – we could make each other laugh until it bordered on hysteria; part was because we were both outcasts – me being the skinny wimp and him being the new kid in school.

By the time we were thirteen, we had a third mutual friend, David Marshel. His family had transferred into our area after their dairy farm failed. David was naive, a little slow, and in sports he had the coordination of a dead cockroach. Many kids thought he was stupid. Tom and I liked him for his openness and zany humour. The three of us got on amazingly well. We had fun together, looked out for each other and got into trouble together; hell, we even spent a night together in a police cell, but that's another story.

In the last year of school, Tom and I were vastly different from when we first met. I'd shot up in height, beanpole-style, and gained muscle from all the hours spent working at my dad's car repair shop. Tom had stopped growing at five-foot-four and his lazy attitude had produced a doughy build. It was now me who fought off any bullies. David had grown into a larger version of the new kid we first met – wide-eyed, freckle-faced and crowned with a blonde mop of hair; only now, he was trying to urge some weedy stubble to grow into a beard.

Our lives took us in different directions. I went to work full-time in the repair-shop and studied Engineering at night. Tom took a job in a supermarket – he could have aimed for something more lucrative, but wanted a job he saw as "easy and low stress". David became a veterinarian assistant. We kept in touch though, meeting up at weekends to talk crap and drink too much.

Drink became Tom's first problem. He lost two jobs because of it. Eventually, David and I sat him down and talked him into straightening himself out – me doing the talking, David nodding in silent agreement. Our buddy seemed to take notice and things improved for him.

Over three years, we all did well. I left my dad's shop and got a job with an engineering firm, and I was earning what I thought to be a fortune. Tom got a job in Sales and found he was a natural for it, leading to promotions and pay-hikes. David got married and a year later, his wife had twins. We

were three guys enjoying life and prospering.

Then Tom started snorting cocaine and his life began heading down the toilet. Once again, I was the one to steer Tom from self-destruction – I literally had to beg him to get him to go into rehab. He was lucky enough to be given time off work. It was through pure generosity that he didn't lose his job.

Tom left rehab and became the best salesman his company had ever known. For a year, at least. Then they were covering for him while he returned to rehab. The dumb ass spent two years going like a yo-yo from rehab to drugs and back again. I was always the one who persuaded him, who got him to realise he was killing himself and ruining everything he'd worked hard for. Unfortunately, he had the memory of a goldfish, or should I say, the memory of an addict.

Our final argument came at his big apartment on his twenty-eighth birthday. David and his family were there, and so was my girlfriend. There had been presents, food and drink. When Tom sneaked off to his bedroom, I got curious about his furtive behaviour – and found him sinking a needle into his arm. It was “just to keep me going”, he had said. We had argued and then exchanged a few blows – I knocked out some of his teeth; he broke my nose. Needless to say, I wasn't enthusiastic about ever seeing him again afterwards.

When a rival firm to the one I was working for offered me a great job in the next state, I went for it. I was happy to start a fresh life, and to abandon the wasted cause of trying to save Tom from himself.

Three years later I was married. At around the same time, poor David got divorced. The experience devastated him – he's been single ever since, never having got over the heartache. David and I kept in contact, though we rarely spoke about Tom.

Until that night – when a frantic smear of words on my iPhone sent me home...

To an appointment with death.

* * *

Conscience is a weird thing.

Your conscience can make you feel responsible for events which are totally out of your control. This was how it was with my reaction to the message about Tom. I knew I would never be able to forgive myself if I didn't try to stop him from harming or killing himself. Another man could have ignored the email and slept peacefully at night. If I failed to try and Tom did die, I'd always believe his blood was on my hands because I didn't make the effort.

My wife Annie didn't argue against my decision to go. She just smiled and said: “You go sort this out. I wouldn't expect any less of you.” I loved her even more for those words, and I missed her dearly the moment I drove away.

When I reached the edge of the city I had been born in, it was after 6AM. I felt awful – tired and nauseous from the strong coffee I'd drunk at stops along the route. By luck, I located a diner that served truckers and travellers all day. One enormous breakfast and two mugs of cappuccino later, and I believed I just might survive the next few hours.

I tried David's phone number for the twelfth time since his email. Still no answer, which didn't make any sense. The number was for a mobile phone, and David should have had it with him wherever he was. Also, you'd imagine he would have expected a call back after his pleading email. If it turned out David had let his mobile battery flat-line, I planned to have some serious words with him.

Tom's number was also on my iPhone, but I didn't call. Face-to-face would be better – it would be the best chance I had of getting through to him. If we argued on the phone first, he might not listen to me when I reached his house.

At least I was sure of Tom's current address. David had mentioned it a few months ago in casual conversation.

I had two choices. Go to David's apartment, in the hope of getting him to accompany me to see Tom... Or just head straight to Tom's house.

Tom's place was an hour away, and David's apartment was thirty minutes further distant. Plus, if David wasn't home when I got there, I didn't want to have to start hunting for him and waste valuable time.

I relieved my bladder of all the cappuccino and headed off to Tom's house.

* * *

In the quiet suburban area, Tom's home stood out distinctively. All the houses were detached, two-storied buildings of pale grey brick with black slate roofing. Each had a small front garden, a driveway, an adjacent garage and a white picket fence. Every property except for Tom's had had the lawn mowed within the last two months; was free of litter; and had clean windows in front of open curtains showing pleasant rooms beyond...

The mere sight of Tom's residence suggested how bad things were. He had never been a fastidious person, but he had possessed enough self-esteem to keep his home in good order. After parking my car, I headed across the pavement for Tom's front gate. I spotted a message written in the grime on his largest front window: *'Clean your damn windows asshole'*.

"At least his neighbours have a sense of humour," I said to myself, hoping none of them would appear to question me.

A high-pitched squeal sounded as I opened the gate. I stepped over some long-dried dog crap and walked to the front door. To either side of my objective, the windows were closed and the curtains drawn. The same was true of the upstairs windows. Above the dirty beige door, the eye of a camera peered at me. To the right of the door was a small metal panel bearing a speaker and a button marked *'CALL'*.

I had to waft apart a thick spider web to gain access to the panel. Frowning, I thumbed CALL.

Somewhere inside the house, an annoying buzz rang out.

I was just beginning to wonder whether the call would be answered when a voice erupted from the speaker.

"Steve! Steve – is that you? Thank God you've come." There was a feverish elation in Tom's voice, as if he was overwhelmed with relief.

For several seconds, I was too stunned to reply. *How the hell did Tom know I was going to call on him? I hadn't known myself yesterday morning. I was here at David's request, in a supposed surprise visit to try to save Tom from the brink of disaster...*

"I'm... here," I managed awkwardly. "You sound all right, though something weird is clearly going on—"

"I know... I know," Tom interrupted. "The place is in a state and I've got poor Dave worried out of his skull... But you're here now and everything will get better. I've always been able to rely on you, buddy. I'm grateful for that..."

"Okay. So... do you want me to stay out here?"

"Shit... Dammit... I'm an idiot. The door's unlocked, pal. Come in and get down to the basement... Sorry, my mind's blown. I've got so much to tell you."

"All right," I said. I was utterly bewildered. "I'm on my way."

* * *

The front door let me into a small, dingy hallway.

I quickly discovered that the inside of the house was more decrepit than the outside. I saw a small table and a coat stand; both were beyond dusty – they were thick with pale brown filth. Webs hung from the arms of the coat stand to form a repulsive decoration; other silken constructions adorned the open doorways ahead and left and right of me. A glance left showed a darkened living room: once a showpiece of plush furnishings and modern conveniences; now a dismal, dirty hovel. The room on my right might have been a dining room, but again a pleasant space had deteriorated horribly.

Tom's house stank too. It was not merely a smell of dirt. There was a damp clamminess to the atmosphere – *dammit, I had to tense myself so I didn't shiver in there* – and some kind of nauseating decay. I'd once come home from a two week holiday to find the fridge broken and the contents spoiled: the smell here was ten times as potent. One of the reasons came to my attention via the light through the door's windowpane... Black mould had grown across the corners of the small hallway, and this was slowly oozing down through the once-chic wallpaper of the room.

"This place is a bloody health hazard..." I hissed under my breath. "What the heck are you doing here, Tom? And why are you down in the basement?"

My eyes grew accustomed to the midnight gloom. When I looked down, I found the carpet was hidden by a layer of collected filth. Oddly, a set of footprints led from the doorway deeper into the house.

In a horror movie, the person in my position – usually a voluptuous cheerleader – would proceed

into the darkened lair without looking for a light switch... Often while I'm snarling "*Turn the lights on, you damn fool!*" at the TV screen... I was neither so brave nor so stupid. I squinted, found a wall switch and tried it. The hall light overhead sparked to life for an instant, fizzled and died. It occurred to me that I'd seen that happen in a movie too.

"Great."

I followed the footprints through into a larger hallway, which was as dark as a tomb. When I found another light switch and tried it, I got no reaction at all. Withdrawing my mobile phone, I activated its torchlight app. A few seconds of arcing the bright beam around and I was wishing for darkness again.

The second hall was about a dozen feet wide and at least ten across. Stairs ran along the right hand wall to the upper level; a doorway beneath the stairs led into some kind of office-space – dark, dirty and criss-crossed by enormous webs. Another door stood open in the wall opposite me, leading through to a kitchen at the back of the house. I could make out a sink and a cooker amongst ominous shadows.

My apprehension about what the other rooms might hold was minor compared to my disgust at my findings in the main hallway. The left hand wall of the room had originally been home for a pair of glass units – the kind a collector might keep their prized possessions in – and a huge rubber plant. I couldn't see what the units held due to the thickness of filth on the glass panes. And the plant was draped dead across the floor, half-smothered in dust. Some kind of insects scrambled between the tentacle-like limbs of the rotting plant.

Worse was what lay near the door to the office: two empty feeding bowls and a long-dead cat. The animal was shrunken-in upon itself, as if partially mummified. I was lucky that the strong smells of the rest of the house obscured the odour of decay from the cat.

"Oh my God... Tom, how long did you leave the poor thing? Did it starve to death while you were down in the basement..?"

The footprints continued through the dirt into the kitchen. No other prints existed. Even the stairs were thick with dirt, showing no one had gone up there for... a long, long time.

My natural instincts for survival were screaming for me to leave the house. *Get out. Call the police, have them investigate.* I'm not one of those people who can get drawn-in by curiosity – I had no desire to explore further... But the thought of Tom, needing me downstairs, made me cross the hallway and step inside the kitchen.

Two things occurred to me on the way.

First, the footprints were at least as large as my own feet. Strange – because Tom was smaller than me... And if the person who had walked through here wasn't him, who else could it have been? And were they still here – which was suggested by the lack of prints leading back out?

Second, I was following the prints. Yet, why? There was nothing to suggest they would really lead to my destination. I just had a *feeling* that following them was what I should do...

I called out "Tom!" when I reached the doorway.

No reply came.

End Of Sample

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