

TUNNELS

by P.J. Blakey-Novis

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Ghost hunters. Just another group of fraudsters along with psychics, witch doctors and faith healers. As much as I enjoyed a good scary story, I had no doubts that this was all it was; just a story. Even so, fear had an appeal; the adrenalin was addictive. Between my wife and I, we had seen almost every horror film worth watching, and many that weren't. We'd read countless tales of vengeful ghosts, demonic possession, psychotic killers, and zombie infestations. Then came the immersive experiences which have exploded in popularity over the past few years.

Our first was a Halloween horror show on a farm; essentially a walk-through filled with actors whose job it was to terrify the visitors. This initial experience blew us away, leaving us desperate for more. We attended theatrical murder mystery events and frightening team games, which involved solving puzzles to escape 'certain death'. We screamed our way through the city's old dungeons, and even attended a weekend of 'zombie outbreak survival' training.

It became a hobby, of sorts, and we were constantly searching for the next horrifying experience. Sometimes we would drive for hours to try out a

new attraction, listening to creepy audio books on the journey to set the mood. We'd been face-to-face with killer clowns, living scarecrows, and more than a handful of zombies. We'd been startled by bumps in the night, and had literally run away from a chainsaw-wielding maniac. The only thing that did not hold any interest, to me at least, were ghosts. Pretend ghostly effects were fine; what I could not understand were events which claimed to be able to show you real ghosts. Confident in my belief that they did not exist, I saw no appeal in spending the night being guided down damp passageways, only to have my beliefs confirmed, and to have to pay for the privilege.

My wife, however, had always believed in ghosts; which may explain why she usually found these things more frightening than I did, and why after a particularly well-done ghost film, she would need me to accompany her to the bathroom, turning on every light on the way. She was regularly pointing out these ghost-hunting events, and I was invariably ignoring her not-so-subtle hints; until one came up at a venue within walking distance of our home. The poster invited people to explore 'the famously haunted tunnels of the wartime fort', a structure which was, perhaps, a mile from our house at most. We had visited the fort on numerous occasions, to look around the museum and enjoy a coffee, but we had never been there after dark.

"Famously haunted?" I said, with a disapproving look. "Can't be that famous."

"We have to go!" Lily demanded, a serious look on her face. "Plus, you owe me for that last place we went to."

"What place?" I asked, despite knowing full-well what she meant. It was advertised with all the usual buzzwords; terrifying, shocking, horrific and so on. But it was also being touted as 'next-level'; claiming previous visitors had left screaming as it was just 'too intense'. Unfortunately, it turned out to simply be a field in the middle of nowhere, full of terrible actors running around, struggling not to laugh themselves. I smiled at the memory; it had been so awful that it now seemed funny. Lily did not agree, and just looked at me. I sighed.

"Fine. On one condition."

"Hmm?"

"If we don't find any ghosts, then we don't go on another ghost hunt again."

"OK, deal."

"And..." I continued. "And we find a secluded bit of the tunnels to get frisky in." There was a pause as I waited for Lily to laugh my suggestion off, but she didn't.

"I'll wear a skirt then," she announced, a coy smile appearing on her red lips.

When the day arrived, I did not feel anything like my normal level of enthusiasm. I was more tired than usual, and the thought of going through empty tunnels until three in the morning on a cold, drizzly night was not at all appealing.

“You still want to go tonight?” I asked.

“Of course. I can’t wait!” Lily replied. “Don’t be wimping out on me now.”

“I’m not. It’s just going to be a late one, and I’m tired already.”

“So, have a nap before we go. I’m still going, even if you don’t come. And if you still want this...” Lily said, lifting her skirt high enough to reveal the black lace beneath. I gasped, involuntarily.

“I can’t say no to that,” I told her, trying to shift the reluctant feeling I had about the evening. I was not tired enough to sleep during the day, but spent the afternoon lounging on the sofa, watching old vampire films from the 1960s while Lily pottered around the house.

“Should we take anything with us?” she asked, popping her head around the living room door. It was getting dark outside, and I still had little motivation to move from where I lay.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I have the tickets in my bag, but wondered if we should take torches? Or drinks?”

“Both would be good; I suppose. Even just for getting back afterward, a torch would be useful; it’s a dark walk from the fort to the main road in the middle of the night. Will you be warm enough in that skirt?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll take a hat and coat - you should do the same.” Lily walked out of the room, leaving me to continue staring at the television, watching as a vampire sank his teeth into the neck of young virgin, all played out in black and white. Soon, Lily returned carrying two torches. She clicked them both on at the same time, right into my eyes.

“Jesus!” I muttered.

“They work!” she declared. “And I have spare batteries in my bag. Get yourself ready, it’s almost time!” she squealed, barely able to hide her excitement. As I pulled on my walking boots, Lily handed me a water bottle. I stared at the bubbles drifting to the surface.

“It’s fizzy,” I pointed out, dryly.

“Gin and tonic. It is Friday night, after all.”

Linking arms, we made our way out into the cool air of the small town. It was peaceful outside, but with enough of a chill for our breath to become visible as we exhaled. The air felt damp, not really raining, but wet enough to make Lily’s bare legs glisten with goose bumps. Despite it being Friday evening, the town was small, and we barely passed anyone else on the fifteen-minute walk to the fort. I glanced at my watch; it was eight thirty-five and we were almost there.

“We’re going to be early,” I pointed out.

“Better than being late. Plus the tour starts at nine; we don’t want to miss anything.”

“How on earth is it going to take six hours to walk around the tunnels? The place isn’t that big!”

“I suppose,” Lily said with a smirk, “that it depends on what we find

down there!”

“Probably nothing,” I muttered. Either Lily didn’t hear me, or she chose to ignore my negativity, but she did not respond. As we turned away from the main road on to the path which led up to the fort’s entrance, Lily began to rummage through her bag for the torches. It was cold, and I was growing impatient.

“How much crap have you got in there?” I moaned, knowing all too well that her bag was like a bottomless pit, filled with an eclectic mix of supposedly essential items.

“Here we go,” she announced, passing me one of the torches. “Let’s go get spooked!” I smiled a little at her childlike enthusiasm, as she stood in front of me with her torch pointing upwards beneath her chin, illuminating her pretty face. She looked as though she were about to tell a scary story around a campfire.

“I’m just here for the black lace,” I told her, giving her bottom a playful squeeze.

“Then you’d better not let the poltergeists get to me first!” We made our way up the path, thick trees forming a barrier on either side of us. It was dark, but the light from the almost-full moon would have nearly sufficed if we had had no torches. Barely twenty feet from the gated entrance, we heard the first scream of the evening; a high-pitched squeal of someone genuinely petrified. We both paused for a moment until we heard laughter following it. I sighed with relief, assuming that someone already inside had fallen victim to a prank of some kind. At least, I hoped that was what had happened.

We were greeted at the gates by the two organizers; Matthew and Chloe. They wore matching hooded tops, which bore the details of their business. I took this as evidence, if any were even needed, that this was purely a money-making venture. Of course, all the immersive events we had attended were businesses of some kind, but they never pretended to be anything other than that. These guys were trying to peddle some truth behind their ghost stories, and that was what had my back up.

Matthew was short, or Chloe was tall; it was difficult to tell from our position on the other side of the gate, in the dark. Either way, they were the same height. They were also both a little overweight and wore nearly identical glasses. In the blackness of the evening, it would have been quite possible to mistake one of them for the other, especially in their matching, branded, baseball caps. I wondered for a moment if they were siblings, or lovers. Then I pondered the idea that they were both, and I felt a little queasy.

“Good evening ghost hunters!” Matthew said, much more loudly than was necessary. The pair of them had unsettling grins across their faces, signalling, to me anyway, that we were about to be taken for a ride by these over-confident fraudsters.

“So, you’ve got ghosts here then?” I asked, making no attempt to hide my skepticism. Lily nudged me, as if I were embarrassing her already. As our guides removed the padlocked chain and proceeded to open up the wrought-

iron gates, Lily pulled out the ticket confirmation that I had printed that morning. Once they had scrutinized the tickets, Matthew and Chloe welcomed us to what they promised would be ‘a truly terrifying tour of one of the south coast’s most haunted locations’, and led us to the open space at the centre of the fort. Neither of them had answered my question about ghosts, barely seeming to acknowledge that I had even spoken. I was certain that I had offended them already, but did not particularly care; after all, I was on the gin and knew they were running a scam. Which is why I asked again.

“Is it just the one ghost? Or is there a whole family down there?” Chloe looked me in the eye, the grin falling away from her face, realizing that she was being mocked.

“There is no doubt that there are at least three spirits dwelling in the deeper tunnels, directly beneath where we are standing right now. It is quite possible that there are more. Hopefully, you will get to meet some of them tonight.” Before I could respond, Chloe turned away and taking Matthew by the hand, the pair climbed on to a lone picnic table which stood outside of the small, now closed, coffee shop.

“Welcome everybody,” Matthew began. There was a faint murmur from the other patrons. I looked around and counted another five people, beside myself and Lily. They had all been talking together when we had approached so it was impossible to tell if they had booked as one group or simply struck up a conversation on arrival.

“Before we begin, I need to go over some ground rules for everyone’s safety,” Matthew said, his voice beginning to sound more theatrical. “In the case of an emergency, the only exit is through the gates which you came in by. It was a working fort at one time and would therefore have been rather foolish to feature emergency exits!” He laughed a little at what he saw as his clever joke. No-one else laughed. “Anyway, the gates are currently locked, but both myself and Chloe have keys; feel free ask either of us if you need to leave before the end.” The gin was starting to go to my head, and the guy stood on the picnic table was irritating me, so I decided to ask a question.

“What if something happens to both of you, and we can’t get the keys to get out?”

“I can assure you that won’t be an issue,” Matthew said with a smile. “We have dealt with many spirits in the past, some of which were rather aggressive, and we would not put any of you, or ourselves, in real danger.”

“Of course,” I muttered sarcastically.

“It is imperative,” Matthew continued, “that we all stay together. I will take the lead, and Chloe will take up the rear.” I sniggered, immaturity. Lily nudged me again. “You are welcome to take photographs, and we have extra torches if anyone needs one,” our guide explained. “It is, of course, very dark in the tunnels and there are a lot of steep steps. Before I pass over to Chloe for a bit of history on the place, does anyone need to use the toilet?” No-one spoke. “Very well. Chloe will explain the legend of the haunting here, and then we’ll be on our way.”

"I'm going for a wee," I whispered to Lily, as soon as Chloe began speaking.

"OK."

"Wanna come?" I asked. Her eyes widened in mock surprise.

"I'm fine, thanks. Don't worry, you'll get your chance later with me. Now shh, I want to hear the story." With a little huff, I made my way back to the iron gates, next to which were the toilets. I dawdled as best I could, managing to miss the first half of Chloe's speech much to my relief. As I resumed my position next to Lily, I was just in time to hear about the three spirits which were supposedly haunting the tunnels.

"She had been a powerful witch, strong enough to place Henry Oats, a wealthy landowner, under her spell. He owned the land on which we are standing now, with his wife Clara, and daughter Elizabeth. The story goes that Henry was seduced by the witch, and caught in the act of love-making, by his wife. Clara was devastated, fleeing from the family home, only to be crushed to death outside by a falling oak. Was it a freak accident, or was it witchcraft?" Chloe looked at our small gathering, as if expecting an answer.

"Was it windy that night?" I asked. "Trees do blow over." I heard someone giggle from the other group, but Chloe chose to continue her tale.

"It was a still night, with no wind or any record of a storm." Chloe stared at me as she said this.

"She's just made that bit up," I whispered to Lily, who ignored me.

"Of course no-one could prove that the witch was responsible for Clara's death, but there were suspicions among the locals. Henry seemed to take his wife's passing well, quickly moving his new lover into his home, enrolling her as a step-mother to little Elizabeth. The child had only been five years old when her mother had died, but she suspected foul play. Unable to understand her father's obsession with this strange woman, and his indifference to her mother's death, Elizabeth eventually sought help from officials in the nearest town. Despite the oddness of Clara's death, Elizabeth's concerns were chalked up to simply disliking her step-mother. This was until people started dying. Over the space of a year, there were a number of other freak accidents; falling trees, unexplained drownings, a shock suicide, and even the unfortunate case of a rich widow falling face-first into a fire. It did not take much digging to find a link between each of the newly deceased; they had all owned land which bordered onto Henry's, or was very near to it. They had all, also, refused to sell it to him. Once this connection was established, the townsfolk were up in arms, angry, and thirsty for revenge. Henry was sleeping when the mob descended on his house, but Elizabeth was at the door, ready to let them in. The mob would not wait for a trial, fearful that the witch would use magic to escape, and she was sentenced to death by fire as soon as they had dragged her into the town square. Henry stayed at the house, powerless to help the woman, unwilling to watch her death in person. Elizabeth, however, wanted to see for herself that the witch was gone. Standing barely six feet away, her eyes met the witch's. Elizabeth watched the flames, oblivious to the cart behind

her. She did not see its wheel hit a hole in the road, causing a barrel to fall. She did not see that barrel roll at her from behind. All she felt was herself falling forward into the flames. No-one from the crowd dared try to pull her out, too afraid that the barrel of gunpowder would explode.” Chloe paused, perhaps in an attempt to create drama.

“And did it?” one of the girls called out.

“Yes it did. The witch and Elizabeth were killed instantly. Shall we begin the tour?”

“Hang on,” the girl called out again, an almost finished cigarette in her gloved hand. She was a little older than us, with dyed black hair, long dark coat, black lipstick, the works. “So, what happened to Henry?”

“No-one knows for sure,” Chloe said. “He became a recluse, presumably devastated by the loss of his family. He died at the house, but there is no cause of death listed in the records.”

“So, you’re saying the three spirits here are Henry, Elizabeth and the witch? What about Clara? And the other people that the witch killed?” the goth woman asked.

“Perhaps they’re all down there!” Matthew interjected. “Elizabeth likes to run along the narrow corridors, singing.” At this point, Lily held my arm, a look of wonder on her face.

“I hope we get to see a ghost!” she whispered, excitedly.

“Let’s hope it’s Henry then,” I told her, going along with the story. “Kids creep me out at the best of times, and that witch sounds like a right bitch!”

Matthew and Chloe led us to a door in the north-east corner of the fort; the entrance to a system of narrow tunnels which connected the various rooms. When the fort had been in use during the second world war, these rooms had been used to store ammunition and supplies for the soldiers stationed there. Once the door had been closed behind us, something which felt unnecessary, it was beyond simply being dark. It was now pitch black and if we had not had the torches, we would not have been able to see someone standing right in front of us. Lily clung on to me as we made our way down the first set of steep, concrete steps, half-expecting an actor to jump out on us at any moment. There was nothing. Our guides led us to the left as we reached the bottom of the steps, into a small room with candle-powered lanterns adorning the walls.

“If everyone can take a seat please, we will make our first attempt to establish contact with any spirits present, before we move on any farther,” Matthew ordered. I looked across at the row of plastic, green chairs lined against one wall; eight of them. In front of the chairs stood a table with a Ouija board on it. When we had all taken our seats, I watched intently as Matthew played his part, eyes closed, moving things around on the board. He called out loudly to the spirits of Elizabeth and Henry, almost begging for them to reveal themselves to the group. Nothing. Then Matthew fixed his gaze straight at me. “Everyone needs to hold hands or this will not work,” he said, unable to conceal his annoyance as he glanced at my right hand. Instead of holding

Lily's, as we had been told to, I had rested it just beneath her skirt, touching her thigh. Under the stare of everyone, I removed my hand from its inappropriate location and took Lily's. Matthew began to call upon the spirits once more. This time something did happen; all eight of the lanterns went out simultaneously. The whole group, myself included, gasped, largely due to the sudden darkness that we had been plunged into. There was a nervous laugh as everyone fumbled with their torches. Our hosts did a good job at looking worried, as if they had not been responsible for the lights going out. I shone my torch towards the ceiling, looking for something that would give away the trick, but found nothing.

"That was pretty cool," I admitted to Lily, a little annoyed that I couldn't figure out how it had been done.

"Where's the blonde girl?" I heard someone ask. Turning to my left, I looked down the row of seats to see that Chloe was sat at the far end. The chair next to her now sat empty. The man who had asked the question stood up, looking around, puzzled. He had been sat to her right.

"What do you mean blonde girl?" the goth asked. "I thought you two were together."

"Nope, I came on my own. Looks like she did too."

"Were you not holding her hand?" Matthew asked, looking concerned.

"I was, but she let go as soon as the lights went out."

"Bravo!" I declared. I couldn't help myself laughing at this point. "So, one of the guests disappears, one who happened to come here alone, and who happened to be sitting next to Chloe at the time. You know there's a passageway at that end of the room, right?" The others stood to have a look. I was right, of course, having been in the tunnels before. The passageway entrance was indented into the wall in the far corner and could easily go unnoticed. Everyone seemed to relax, seeing the hoax for what it was. Everyone apart from Matthew and Chloe, who just exchanged worried glances.

"What's her name?" goth girl asked, looking to Chloe. "We should call her back." Chloe looked to Matthew, unsure of how to answer.

"She wasn't with us," Matthew said. "I don't want to cause any panic, but she honestly did come alone, as a paying customer like the rest of you."

"Bullshit," I announced, but I was beginning to doubt my own confidence. The two hosts looked far more worried than anyone else.

"Then maybe she just thought it would be funny," said the guy who had been sat next to her when she disappeared. "Sure she'll be back soon."

"I hope so," goth girl said. "But it was you that put out the candles, wasn't it?" she said, looking nervously at Matthew.

"You came for a ghost hunt; don't start to freak out when you actually encounter one." He seemed to have lost his friendliness, however fake it had been, and now appeared on edge, as though he had made a mistake.

"He's got a point." I turned to see Lily standing up, addressing the group. "Whether we honestly thought we would have some kind of paranormal encounter or not, we all came for the frights. We've been to a lot of things like

this, and this one doesn't seem much different. Matthew and Chloe are in character, and are unlikely to break that unless there is an actual emergency. Whether blondie was an actress, or she thought it would be funny to hide of her own accord, is neither here nor there. The point is, we had a scare, and now we move on to the next part of the tour; isn't that right?" She looked at Matthew, desperately wanting her words to be true.

"Erm," he stuttered, glancing at Chloe, "Yes. That's right. And as someone said, I'm sure the other guest will reappear in due course. Probably quite soon, in fact, as that passageway is where we're heading next." Matthew shone his torch into the narrow entrance, failing to hide his hesitance. "It's a squeeze in here, but this is where the soldiers used to bring the stores of food. There are numerous small store rooms, which come off of the passageway. It is also the location of the most frequent sightings of Elizabeth, so keep your eyes peeled."

Four of the group followed behind Matthew, torches flickering to cast as much light as possible in the tight space. I followed, with Lily close behind. I could feel her grabbing on to the back of my jacket. The walls were no more than a foot and a half apart, causing one of the larger guests to turn a little to the side as he walked. No-one spoke, the only sounds being those of heavy breathing and the scraping of clothing along the damp walls as we made our way along. We passed the first two store rooms, one on either side of the passageway. When we reached the entrance to the third, Matthew halted the line.

"If everyone could come in to this room please; I have another little story to share with you." We all shuffled in, and it was a relief to see some large electric lights attached to the wall. The brightness was a little dazzling, but certainly made us all feel safer. Everyone turned off their torches, all except Lily, who pointed hers at the floor as if preparing for another blackout.

"Everyone still here?" I asked, glancing around. Eight people; still one less than we started with but no new surprises. Yet. The group murmured as if to confirm their presence and Matthew began to talk, summoning his theatrical voice once again.

"This room is a key part to the story of Henry Oats. It lies directly beneath the location of his home. During our research, we were told by several eyewitnesses, that an image of a bearded man had appeared in this very room on numerous occasions. He did not seem menacing, so please do not be afraid. I will call out to him, and perhaps he will make an appearance." Matthew began calling Henry's name, asking him to make his presence known, but to no avail. The next ten seconds were a blur, however. The electric lamps all went out, again plunging us into darkness, aside from the light from Lily's torch. Everyone made some kind of sound, ranging from a slight gasp to a full-blown scream. Then there was laughter and the room was illuminated again. As I looked toward the sound of the laughter, I saw that it was coming from the man who had been sat next to the blonde lady. He was in hysterics, his hand still resting on the switch for the lighting.

“Fucking asshole!” the goth girl said.

“I’m sorry; I couldn’t resist,” the man said, still laughing at his prank. The entire group was looking at him, trying not to give him the satisfaction of actually having terrified all of us. Which is why the whole group saw his face change, from a self-satisfied smirk to pure fear. His eyes widened. His jaw fell slack, as he gazed beyond us. Lily was behind me and as she turned, was the first to let out a scream. Chloe had been stood in the entrance to the room; well, she still was. But now she was merely propped up against the concrete wall. Her eyes bulged, looking as though they would jump from their sockets at any moment. Her skin had turned a paler shade, and her trousers were dark from urine. We all stared for a moment, trying to process the image, trying to persuade ourselves that it was just part of the show. But there was no mistaking that Chloe was dead, the bottom of her torch protruding from her widened mouth, the shaft of it rammed down her throat.

The group parted to allow Matthew through, who tearfully lowered her to the floor. He struggled to pull the torch free, and it came out with the crack of a tooth. He looked stunned, as if he did not know what he was now required to do.

“This is your fault!” he suddenly yelled at the man who’d turned off the lights, before lunging towards him. Matthew shoved him against the wall, before breaking down in tears. It was clear that this was not part of the plan, and most definitely constituted an emergency; everyone pulling out mobile phones to summon help. Of course, so far underground and surrounded by concrete did not bode well for phone reception.

“It must have been that blonde bitch!” someone said.

“Either way, we need to get out of here.” No-one disagreed with the goth girl’s assessment of the situation and, with torches on, the group piled out of the room and headed back the way that we had come. Lily and I were last to leave the room as I had to do something; get the other key from Chloe. Lily looked away as I rummaged through the dead girl’s pockets, eventually locating it and slipping it inside my shoe. I do not know why I did not put it in my pocket but, for some reason, it felt safer being more hidden.

As we moved along to catch up with the others, I heard a clear ‘Oh my God!’ coming from the front of the line, followed by “That’s impossible!”

“What is it?” I yelled.

“The way we came in. It’s blocked.”

“What do you mean blocked? With what?” I asked, sure that there was some kind of mistake.

“It’s been filled in. Bricked up. There’s a fucking wall there now!”

Some of the women in the group had begun to cry at this point, and I could feel the panic rising within us all.

“Turn around!” someone called out. We all did so, putting Lily and myself at the front. I tried to recall what I knew of the tunnels from previous visits, but they looked a little different. Regardless of which way I thought we should go, we really only had the option of continuing along the passageway.

We hurried, seven frightened adults squeezing through. *What if this is still only a show, just a really well done one?* I wondered. *Maybe I really underestimated these guys.* It was an optimistic thought, I accepted that, but it did help to keep the panic at bay for a little while longer. Long enough, in fact, for us to reach the end of the passageway. We emerged onto a concrete area with steps going both up and down. I recognized it.

"I know where we are; we can get out up there!" I pointed to the steps and shone my torch. It wasn't far to the top from here, maybe twenty steps at the most. Beyond them, we could make out another iron door, similar to the one we came in through further along the building. I rushed past Lily and up the steps, pushing against the door. It didn't budge. "Matthew!" I called down, into the darkness. "Have you got a key for this?" He came running up to where I was stood.

"I have the key for the door we came in by, try that." He handed me a key which I rammed into the lock. It went in, but would not turn.

"It's no good. Shit. Is there another way out?"

"Only the way we came in, if we can find another way around. Or we go down." Matthew did not look happy with this idea. There were seventy-eight steep steps to the bottom, which led to a wide passageway with multiple rooms. The rooms featured several lookout holes in the brick walls which had been used to watch out for the enemy during the war. It was also rumoured to be the most haunted part of the fort.

"We might be able to get someone's attention from down there," I suggested, struggling to stay positive.

"It's getting late; I can't imagine there will be anyone around. But I can't think of anything else to suggest." Matthew looked downtrodden, upset over the death of Chloe, on the verge of giving up himself. Carefully, I made my way back down to the others and explained our options, as far as I could see them, omitting the part about walking straight into the most haunted area here. No-one disagreed, unable to come up with a better plan. Then came the laughter. Not an adult's laughter, but that of a child. It echoed along the concrete walls, ricocheting towards us from where we had just been.

"Elizabeth!" Matthew gasped, his face turning grey. Time seemed to slow at that moment, as every one of us turned our gazes towards the passageway. The laughter became louder, but we saw nothing until that final second. The laughter felt as though it were surrounding us and then silence, just for a second, followed by an unmistakable apparition. A girl, Elizabeth presumably, skin burnt through to muscle and bone, holes where the eyes should have been, stood among us. We watched her mouth slowly open, wider than should be humanly possible, before she released a blood-curdling scream. It startled us all; made us all take a step backward. Unfortunately for the larger man in the group one step back meant a fall down seventy-eight concrete steps. He went with a series of thuds, falling too fast for anyone to try to help him. He must have been half-way down when we heard the crack of bone before he reached the bottom. Elizabeth was gone, all exits were blocked; we had no

choice.

The stairway was wide enough for three people to stand side-by-side, so we made our way down in two rows of three, all clinging to one another with six torch beams illuminating our paths. Torchlight soon fell across the body at the bottom of the steps. I felt a little bile rise into my mouth as the cracking sound registered; it must have been his neck breaking. The man's head was looking straight at us, but his body was facing in the opposite direction. Three steps from the bottom, I turned to look back up. The torches were not bright enough to reach the top.

"What's the plan now?" asked the light switch prankster.

"If we head along here, there are some gaps in the wall. We can shout for help and just hope someone hears us."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we really need to get that door open up there, or find the one we came in by."

The six of us were huddled together as we walked, torches shining both in front and behind us. We found the first room which branched off of the tunnel; stacks of bricks lay across the floor, covered with blue tarpaulin. There were four or five holes in the wall, maybe ten inches by four. We all fought to see through them, to search for a passer-by. We yelled, we flashed our lights, but had no response.

"Three of us should stay here; the other three can go to the next room. Maybe we'll have more luck that way," Matthew said.

"We should stick together," the goth girl said, shocked by any suggestion of splitting the group up.

"What do you think?" Lily asked me.

"I think the longer we stay down here and the later it gets, the less chance there is of someone happening to pass by. But Matthew is right; it is worth checking out the other room. Don't want to miss the chance if there is someone on that side that we could have not noticed."

"But stick together, or split into two groups?" she asked, as if I was now the leader of this petrified team of reluctant ghost hunters.

"It's just the next room; you, me, and Matthew will check it out, you three keep looking out there and see if anyone comes by. We'll only be a few minutes and if it's no better we'll get back up to that door." The guy who had turned off the lights earlier seemed to see himself as my second-in-command, ordering the goth girl and the other man, who had barely spoken to anyone, to keep watch.

"Keep looking that way please; I'm about to take a piss," he announced as we left the room. The room next door was virtually identical, with the same number of gaps in the brick wall but facing a slightly different angle. We tried, once again, to shout for help, flashing our torches furiously. And once again, it was no use.

"Let's get the others and see what we can do with that door," Lily said. "It's fucking creepy down here."

“As opposed to up there, with the barbecued child?” I said, knowing that staying down here wasn’t going to be an option for long.

“She’s right,” Matthew admitted, looking as though he would cry at any moment. As we exited the room, turning right to grab the others, I walked straight into that loud-mouthed prankster. It startled us both, but he already looked shaken, much more than he had done before needing to relieve himself.

“What?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“You need to look.” His face was so full of fear that there was no denying it had to be pretty awful news, more so as he had not seemed all that shaken by the missing woman or the two deaths so far. I almost dropped my torch as I looked into the room that we were in only a few minutes earlier. I had not heard a sound coming from there, nothing to indicate what had happened. Suspended from the ceiling were the goth and the quiet man, hanging by their necks. A sheet of blue tarpaulin used on each of them to hold them in place, draining the life from them.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied, looking at the ground, the walls, anywhere but at the swinging corpses. “I went for a piss over there.” He pointed to a corner of the room where I could make out a wet patch. “They were still looking through those holes; I turned around, and they were...up there.” His voice started to break a little, as if trauma was beginning to set in, the reality of our predicament becoming too much.

“We have to go and try the door again,” Lily explained once more. “It’s our only hope.” I held on to her arm tightly, and noticed that the two men behind us were now also holding onto each other; fear having replaced any other inhibitions. We hesitated briefly as we passed the broken body at the foot of the steps, before starting our ascent into the darkness. *Seventy-eight*, I reminded myself, counting aloud as we went.

“One, two, three, four....”

“Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty...” Still the torchlight only showed steps ahead.

“Seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight...” Still more steps. “We should be at the top,” I said, stopping for breath. Lily’s eyes widened as she shone her light behind us. I turned to see what she had noticed and couldn’t process it - there was the body, neck snapped. We were standing on the sixth step up from the bottom.

“Nope,” Matthew said, his hands trembling. “Not possible. Just need to keep going.” And he started again at the steps, much faster than before, moving ahead of us into the darkness. We walked those steps for what felt like an eternity, losing count as we went. We could hear Matthew panting ahead of us, but always just beyond the torchlights reach.

“I’m at the top!” we heard, not too far ahead of us. Matthew had made it. We kept on until, a few steps further, the whole tunnel was illuminated. Looking up we saw them both, Matthew and Elizabeth, standing at the top of the steps. The light came from the flames which had engulfed Matthew, and

before we could even speak, Elizabeth shoved him towards us. I grabbed Lily towards me, pulling her out of the way of the burning man before he reached her. Our companion was not as fast to react, the fiery, still live, bulk of our tour guide knocking him down into the abyss with a scream. Lily and I looked at each other, silently deliberating whether or not we should follow them, to see if he had survived. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but neither of us were brave enough to go back down there, and certainly not when we were this close to the top.

“Elizabeth,” Lily called, taking me by surprise.

“What are you doing?” I asked in a whisper.

“I don’t know,” she replied, sounding desperate. “But I don’t want to be set alight and thrown down the bloody steps, so what would you suggest?”

“Elizabeth, are you there?” Lily called out again. Silence for a moment. Then a voice.

“Mummy?” I looked at Lily, having no idea how to respond to that.

“Yes Elizabeth, it’s mummy.”

“Are you fucking mad?” I hissed.

“Do you know how to open that door up there, Elizabeth?” Lily asked.

“Why do you want the door open?” the voice asked. We took another step upward. There looked like only four or five more, and then the last twenty to the door.

“I thought we could play outside,” Lily said, all the while looking at me. “Would you like to play outside?”

“Do you promise not to leave again?” Elizabeth asked.

“Of course. Can I come up? You won’t hurt me, will you?”

“I won’t hurt you mummy.”

“I have a friend with me. Can he come up as well?” *Great*, I thought.

*What if she says no?*

“Only if he is nice,” was the response.

“He is very nice; I promise. Now, can you open the door for us?” There was a pause, followed by a creaking sound. Light poured in from the now-open door, light which emanated from the street lights on the fort’s concourse. We ran toward the door, knowing that it was our only chance. I practically dragged Lily out into the cold air, running as fast as I could towards the locked gates. As we neared them, we heard banging coming from the door we had used to enter the tunnels, a muffled voice behind it, asking for help. *Blondie!* As I searched in my shoe for the key to the padlock, Lily yanked at the iron doors. They were not locked, but were stiff with age. Lily found some wood nearby, thin enough to wedge between the door and frame, providing sufficient leverage to prise it open. As the blonde fell out into the open, Elizabeth’s burnt figure appeared again. What was left of her face was distorted in anger.

“Where is my mummy?” she screamed. I clicked open the padlock, yanking the chain away from the gates. I had to make a decision, and I’m not proud of it.

“Elizabeth, she’s here,” I shouted. The girl’s eyeless stare turned to me.

“Get ready to run,” I told Lily, quietly. Grabbing the blonde girl, I shoved her towards Elizabeth, with a whisper of ‘sorry’.

“Mummy!” the girl cried, disappearing back through the door with the woman whom I had just sacrificed. Lily looked distraught, almost disgusted by my actions, but did not pause for long. We shoved open the gates and ran, full pelt, all the way back to our house. Once we were safely inside, with every lock in place and every light turned on, we sat to get our story straight. It had to be reported, we knew that, but we also knew how crazy it would sound.

An hour after we had called the police, they arrived at our house. They threatened us with wasting police time. They had searched the whole place and there was no sign of foul play; no bodies, no Ouija board, nothing out of place. They told us that they had called the events manager of the fort and been told that nothing had been booked in for that evening - there had been no ghost hunt. The more we insisted that we were telling the truth, the more we were told we would be arrested for wasting their resources. Lily and I were stuck with the memories of that night, unable to explain them, unable to share them with anyone else. And that has been our curse ever since.

#### THE END

This story, along with five others, appears in a collection of horror stories, *Tunnels and Other Short Stories*. If you enjoyed *Tunnels*, please take a look at *Embrace the Darkness*, and *The Artist*, also from the same author, and keep up to date with news online at [www.redcapepublishing.com](http://www.redcapepublishing.com), and connect on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Lastly, I hope you enjoyed the story and would ask that you take a moment to leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads (both would be awesome!), even just a quick click on the star rating to show what you thought.

Thanks for reading!