

Shut-in

By Josh Smith

The crisp scent of spring air overtakes me in an instant, as does the blinding light of the sun. It takes me up in its arms, cleanses me. I can feel it on my skin, the fresh, clean oxygen, the radiance of our star. My pores drink it in as my eyes strain to adjust to the overwhelming brightness. When they finally open, they see colors I never knew existed, colors so deep and bright, they increase the rate of my already pounding heart. I struggle to lift myself from the ground, but retain only enough strength to roll onto my back and gaze at the sky. The details of the clouds have never been so precise, their shapes more lifelike – and the shocking blue of the sky itself! Motionless for a moment, I feel myself drifting into its inverted ocean. My final breath tastes sweet, entering these lungs with a soft caress that runs through my entire body, leaving the slightest tickle of a familiar hand lovingly passing throughout, and it is the greatest sensation I have ever felt.

I come to with the groggy head of a man drugged. This has happened before, but something tells me that an accidental roofie at a house party years ago has no comparison to my present situation. It is dark, cold. Smells of mildew and sour earth. I stumble around the room, fumbling for something – anything. All I find is a single lamp. Switching it on, I begin searching for clues.

Memory slowly crawls back into my head. A drink after work at my local dive, minding my own business, just trying to- him! It had to be Pete! Shit! I knew something felt odd. He could've been sitting right next to me and I would never have known it. Pete, my wife's crazy ex-husband. Everyone always says their ex is crazy, but hers is a documented lunatic. Shortly after they were married, he began beating and torturing her. Somewhere amongst details too painful to reveal to me, she escaped long enough to contact the police. Twelve years now he's been gone, and last month we got a letter announcing his parole. She was terrified and I'll admit I was worried – apparently not worried enough.

There is no hope of escape. The only two exits; a shuttered window and a door, refuse to budge. Probably boarded up. Not a crack anywhere large enough for me to pry at. I whack at the window with my shoes to no avail. I shout every ounce of air from my lungs, but the sound seems to stick to the walls and die instantly. I scour the room again, hoping to discover anything useful, but there is still only the lamp. My only light. My connection to the world outside. To my wife. For a guy he's never met, that bastard really wants me to suffer. I wonder how long he'll keep me in here.

Six hours. Yeah, probably six or seven hours I've been in here now. My stomach is grumbling and still a bit sore from the *secret ingredient* Pete slipped into my whiskey. I've bounced myself off every inch of every wall in this place with nothing to show but sore, bruised up shoulders and a shortness of breath. This room is like a fortress. Must be soundproofed too, I've screamed until my lungs and throat felt scorched. Still no sign of that bastard. He'll probably let me rot in here all night. I know he's got her by now. I can't even bear to think what he has in store for her.

The air smells more and more putrid as time passes and I sure as hell don't see any ventilation. He's not gonna just let me fucking die in here is he? Suffocate me? Starve me? Let me fucking die in this shitbox room while he has his way with her? I gotta get the fuck out of here now! I take aim at the door, near the knob and give it a kick that would easily bust any double-reinforced lock, but it doesn't even budge. It's probably the strongest surface in this place! He's gotta be fucking with me. I know it. I try the walls again, kicking, ramming with all my might until I collapse next to the lamp, with the moldy, dead stink of the floor crawling all over my skin. I'm fucked.

It's a mind game. It has to be. Any second, that perverse son of a bitch will come strolling in here like nothing happened and put a bullet between my eyes. No, that would be too easy. He'll show up with her. Beat me, tie me down, force me to watch him rip her to shreds. Inside and out. Kill us both slowly. I have got to get those images out of my mind. I need to relax and get myself out of here. There has to be a way, I have to be missing something. I sit down against the wall, click the lamp off and breathe deep, gagging on this stale air.

I hear something scraping, is there someone outside fucking with me? I switch the lamp back on and run circles around the room, pressing my ear to each wall but I hear nothing. I sit back down and kill the light. Again, A deep scraping noise. Lights on. Nothing. Off. Scrape. On. I get up and walk from heel-to-toe the length of the room. About twelve and-a-half steps one length, fourteen the other.

Sit down.
Lights out.
Wait.
Listen.
Lights on.
Heel-to-toe.

Just shy of twelve? No, that's not right. Check again. Not quite twelve. But, no, th- no I, I must have miscalculated. Once more, same result. The first time, the first time must have been wrong. It had to have been. I don't want to check the other distance, but I absolutely have to.

Slowly.
One.
Step.
At.
A.
Time.

One.Two.Three.Four.Five.Six.Seven.Eight.Nine.Ten.Eleven.Twelve.Thirteen . . .

I wake up with my stomach screaming for food. I woke up. That means I slept. I turn the lamp back on, cringing from its glare. I'd eat a fucking bug right now if there were a crack for one to crawl in. Pete's gotta come soon. He's gotta know his mind fuck

is working. I make another inspection of the room. Looking for a way out, looking for a small set of tracks, looking for a pulley system, looking for a tiny camera lens hidden somewhere. There is still only the lamp. There is still only the ever-growing stink of rot. The lack of air. I sit down, frustrated, hungry, exhausted. How long could I have slept here? Too cold and uncomfortable for it to have been long. Not to mention I don't feel the least bit rested. More worn out, if anything. Are the walls really coming for me? Where is my wife? What is he doing to her?

No one deserves to be shut up like this. Pete knows that. Killers, rapists and child molesters all get to go out in the prison yard. Even guys in solitary confinement get to eat. I'm sure Pete spent his fair share of time in solitary. Even he doesn't know how this feels. I've never been locked up, but if I make it out of here alive, I'll never be concerned about it. Sure it lasts longer, but being stuck in this shitty, moldy little room for what? One day? Maybe two? Regardless, it feels like a fucking eternity in a dim, confined desert. Fuck, I'm thirsty.

I need out. I need to get the fuck out of this place. I need her. Pete was here, but he didn't come in the door. No, he came up through the floor, appeared in the dust. He stank. I think he's dead. Buried under this room and I'm next. I'm going to choke on the dust and mold and die and become the floor. That stink will be my rotting flesh sinking into the fissures of the wood just like old Pete. Pete didn't put me here. Pete's here too. Pete was here first. He wouldn't fuck me like this. He's never even met me. No no no not old Pete. Pete's a good man. At least he was. I killed him today. Yep. He came in through the floor, that fuck. He came in running his mouth. I tied her up. I beat the shit out of her. I fucked her while she screamed. She screamed until I knocked all her teeth down her throat, he said. So I busted his head open with his own lamp. Hit him hard enough to kill him. The lamp, anyway. I killed the lamp. The lamp that killed Pete. Pete, the fuck who put me in this stinking, rotten fucking box.

Been here in the dark for a while. Slipping in and out of consciousness. Reality. This is it. I'm dead. I'm cold, weak, can hardly breathe. I'm going to die in this terrible little room. How do you spend the final moments of your life? Most people go skydiving, visit an exotic location, spend time with family, with friends. Eat their favorite meal. I draw dead men in dust that I can't even see. I cut myself with ineffective shards of busted light bulb. I choke on the last of this fetid air. I howl to no one until my throat is too dry to produce anything but an abrasive cough. Futility. I never had much of a grasp on it until now. Now it is all I have. From an intangible idea to the only real thing I can grasp in this deep blackness. Except this lamp, and what the fuck am I going to do with a ruined lamp?

Throw it, apparently. I didn't even realize I was clutching it until I heaved the battered lump of metal and wire across the room with more strength than I knew remained in me. Just before the knock of it hitting the ground, there was a different sound. A strange, small tapping. Lots of small tapping all at once. I haul myself up and stumble forward through this vast, silent nothing until I reach the opposite wall. Feeling around, I get a splinter in my right index finger – the lamp split a board from the window shutter! Still, no light came through. There was something else beyond that window, and as I knelt, I understood.

Grains of sand surrounded the bent shape of the lamp. Sand. Pete fucking sealed me in a room and buried the entire thing? He must have met up with some kindred spirits in the joint to set him up with such a secure little torture chamber. Somebody had to help him fix this place up, some guys with construction know-how, some guys with connections. Some absolute sociopaths. No one could do this on their own. There's no point in pondering it if I'm just going to die here, so I take up the lamp and set to work chipping and prying the boards from the window, the dirt pouring in around my feet. Thank God they didn't cement me in.

I keep digging with the flat base of the lamp. The possibility of escape, of living, has rejuvenated me enough to dig, but I cannot deny the aches of my fatigued body. Survival first, recovery later. Then I'm going to fucking murder Pete.

Feels as if I've been digging for hours. Mouthfuls of dirt suck the last of the moisture from my glands. The weight of it around me – all around me – presses what little air remains out, allows even less back in. Claustrophobia takes on a whole new meaning. I scoop dirt past my body, hoping that it continues to enter the room through the window somewhere below. I scoop above my head hoping that there is nothing further but more dirt, and then – and then! The possibility of air. Of freedom. It's not even a promise, but the simple possibility is enough to keep me burrowing.

No sign of light. I've got to be above the room by now. The process is slow, but all progress is. I have got to keep going. Taste a good meal. Taste anything other than earth. Taste her lips. Taste Pete's blood. Smell something other than sickness and decay. Feel something other than my imminent death.

The soil! I... I can see it! It's got a visible texture! Just a little farther and I'm free! Just a little more. Just... just a little more... strength.