

GO TO TAPE!

by Matt Coote

"Go to tape!"

Francis rocks against the wall of the dark cellar. The manacles attached to his wrists don't allow him to stand, not that he could anymore even if he wanted to, hasn't been able to straighten his legs for a while. He hasn't eaten in almost a week, not since before the sickness. Not since Mom and Dad dragged him down here half awake, sweating and itching. Their faces had been blank as they fastened the steel manacles round his wrists and retreated back up the stairs to the kitchen.

There'd been arguments after that, screaming matches, stamping, slamming doors. And Laine crying. The baby crying somehow made it worse, he could imagine Mom holding her, rocking her, telling her everything would be alright.

He hugs himself, shivering in the darkness, wipes his eyes with the dirty sleeve of his jacket. Taylor's jacket. Cast offs from a brother who'd been a dead guy before he was born. Taylor, the golden boy from Dad's first marriage. He felt the oddly warm metal of his hand against his face and a wave of misery coursed through him. Something had happened to him. Something that made him dirty, something apart from where he's gone to the bathroom down his leg. He'd seen it in Mom's eyes when she'd come down here yesterday. The bare bulb had flicked on, blinding him for a moment. Blinking had brought Dad's worktable swimming into focus, the tools carefully racked. The old washer/dryer lurking in the corner under the stairs. In the darkness he's been imagining it as a camera, been giving his yo-boys the full 60 minutes. In the sudden light it had looked threateningly normal.

Mom had come slowly down the stairs, carefully avoiding looking at him. Stopping at the foot of the stairs she'd slowly brought her eyes around to stare at him. At first she'd looked sad, then she'd seen the mess on the floor, and the silver grey metal of his hands and feet. The sadness had turned to cold disgust. She'd spat at him, flung a small chocolate bar at him and fled upstairs. For almost an hour he'd had light. Had tried to scrub the metal away. Eventually, mercifully the light had clicked off.

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His lips are cracked, his legs are cramped, but he can't straighten them. He doesn't know why, and that just makes it worse. The hunger and thirst were bad, but at least he knew it was lack of food and water. His legs' stopping moving was worse. The dead weight had almost sent him toppling over when he'd tried, desperately to straighten them. It's worse now, his fingers are immobile, clamped round his metal ankles. He can still move his arms though, which is weird.

He's tried yelling for Mom and Dad, tried yelling for his yo-boys Fritz and Poppy, but nobody's coming. He's alone and he thinks he's dying.

He feels himself sweating despite the cold. Feels himself beginning to gag and forces himself to swallow it back down. He remembers the last time he threw up, whimpers through clenched teeth. Not that clenched teeth had helped last time.

Eyes closed he takes a deep breath, runs his dry tongue across his lips. His head aches, and he feels so very tired. A door slams upstairs and he hears Dad's voice. He can't make out words, but he sounds angry. There are more voices up there, one of them sounds like Uncle Brad. The sounds upstairs increase, scrapes, bangs.

The light clicks on. He can see the glare through his closed eyelids. Struggling to open them he manages only a small crack. Dad's feet appear at the top of the stairs. Heavy lids droop as Dad comes slowly down. For a few moments he can see the big heavy work boots, hear Dad's breathing as he stands above him. Then the boots move away towards the tool rack. His hearing's been fading

in and out and the sounds of tools being taken off the rack are muffled. Imagination sees Dad using his tools to cut through the manacles, sees him picking Francis up and holding him. Then imagination takes a darker turn and the whir of a circular saw becomes a whine as the blade cuts into his arm.

Imagination fades as he hears the footsteps moving up the stairs. His eyes won't open, and he panics. He can't move anything except his head now. He rocks it back, banging against the wall. The impact cracks his eyes open again. The tool rack is empty. The tools gone.

The world around him is oddly silent. He can hear the thud of his blood moving, sluggish despite his panic, but there's no noise outside his own body.

His breath is difficult, he can feel something blocking his mouth. This must be what drowning feels like. Except there's still a little air leaking in. Dizziness ebbs and flows around him. The bare cellar tilts and spins. When did they move the washing machine? He can't remember.

His eyes are watering now, painful and dry, but having cracked them open he can't force the lids closed. He can't even turn his head now. Desperately he tries to force his eyes to blink, just once. His jaw feels cramped from clenching, but he can't relax it.

The light clicks out, automatic power saving noting the lack of 'trod activity in the room. Darkness folds in around. It feels like his eyes are watering. The dry soreness stays though. Sleep is coming. Tiredness beckons. In final desperation, through the clenched jaws his voice comes muffled and ragged, "Go to tape!"

The pains all gone now, he floats, blind and deaf. The warmth is soothing, almost rocks him. He'd be bothered, but he's too tired. The spinning sensation as he falls into sleep feels like sunlight on his skin. Golden, warm. Life.

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The silver black statue lies against the cellar wall. Dirty clothes on a child's figure. The open eyes stare sightless and blank at the glowing bulb. Flies buzz around the small figure, drawn by the rank smell from the soiled clothing.

"And the basement's been converted to a laundry room/workshop ... dear god, what's that smell?" The agent gags as the smell hits him. A pretty young woman with short cut red hair covers her nose and mouth, her partner waves a hand in front of his face. The agent's eyes flick down towards the stairs. He runs quickly through his virtuality briefing on the house.

"Maybe the sewer's backed up." He shrugs and logs a problem report on the company system. "Better see if there's a window we can crack open, air the place a bit." He watches the virtuality plan of the basement flick into view, rotates it, finds the ventilation system, reaches out with and flicks the virtual switch on the wall. From below a low pitched hum starts up as the system whirs into life.

"Let that clear a bit," he turns to the young couple, smiling with fake confidence, "may as well take a look upstairs for the moment".

"Used to be a family house, so there's plenty of room for you to start one," the agent waves them towards the upstairs. "Security system's top notch for this area, full virtuality hook-up in every room, previous owners even left a few pieces of furniture in one of the kids rooms." As the voice fades, the light clicks off, leaving only the hum of the ventilation.

Light again. The bulb flicks to life. The smell's lessened now. The odour neutralisers kicking in. Footsteps on the stairs announce the return of the agent and the young couple.

"Like I said before, the basement's been converted to a workshop and laundry. Lights are virtuality controlled, system was completely upgraded last year."

He reaches the bottom of the stairs before he sees the statue. Eyes open wide in shock and he fumbles for his 'trod, ripping them off and praying the thing he's seeing is just some left over

watchdog construct. House security system, please let it be the house security system. He closes his eyes and opens them again, waiting for the thing to vanish. It doesn't. He snaps into awareness of his clients on the stairs, turns to usher them back, the thought running through his head that maybe he can still get the sale if they don't see this.

Too late he realises, as the woman's eyes go wide in horror. Her partner retches. The basement room clusters in around them as they beat a retreat upstairs. And the darkness returns.