

THE MEDICINE CABINET

by Sean Bugg

Steve found the finger in the bathroom medicine cabinet, wrapped in tissue and hidden behind a bottle of mouthwash. He didn't gasp or yelp or make any of the other noises he would have expected himself to make. He just stood there thinking, *That's a real finger. There's a finger in the medicine cabinet.*

The finger was white, both racially and from the lack of blood. A few dark specks stained the tissue paper he had pulled away, mostly around the base of the finger where a small bit of bone protruded.

No, it's fake, he thought. It's just a rubber finger he keeps in here to scare anyone who looks through his stuff.

Steve had run into such practical jokes in other quests through medicine cabinets: chattering teeth and the like. He also knew that some men used their bathrooms as self-promotion vehicles, leaving extra-large condoms conspicuously around or stocking up a few high-priced toiletries before throwing a big party. Steve knew the real stuff – the stuff that actually gets used – would be either under the sink or more safely hidden in a bedroom closet, the latter being far more difficult to reconnoiter.

Seeing the joke loosened his muscles, which had pulled tight and stiff when he unwrapped the finger. The tissue lay in his left hand, a little nest for what seemed to be a

replica of an index or middle finger, complete with a wide nail and ragged cuticle. He brought his hand up to get a better look at it. The motion caused the finger to roll out of the tissue.

He caught it in mid-roll with his free hand, then gasped, jerking both hands toward his body and sending the finger tumbling to the floor, where it landed with a soft, flat *flump* on the tiles.

Oh my god it is real, he thought.

It felt rubbery and cool but it was most definitely real.

Uncertain what to do, he sat down on the edge of the tub behind him and stared at the finger on the tile. It had landed on its side, fingerprint toward the tub. It bent slightly, like a hastily drawn parenthesis. The finger had been severed a little below the second knuckle, the flesh there ragged, as if it had perhaps been ripped off.

You don't know that. You don't read a few serial killer novels and instantly qualify as a forensics expert.

But it did look ripped, the bone more clearly visible on the inside surface of the finger where more of the skin was missing. The exposed inner flesh was a clotted maroon.

Okay, what now? The finger couldn't be that old. Steve distinctly remembered the smell of formaldehyde and other preservatives from his high school biology class, and nothing like those wafted from the finger – it didn't seem to smell at all. The skin was evenly colored with no spots of decomposition.

How long before it would start to rot? A day? Two? Does it really matter?

It did seem to matter. Maybe it was some bizarre possession, like the yellowed human skull his stoner college boyfriend used as an ashtray. Maybe it was a grotesque souvenir from an anatomy class.

Damn, I should have asked him what he did.

He had recently taken a pledge not to ask cute guys at the bar what they did for a living, one of the top three most cliched opening gambits.

But if the finger was new – maybe *recent* was a better word – then he was in serious trouble. On such short notice, he couldn't come up with any reassuring reasons that anyone would have a somewhat fresh human finger squirreled away in the bathroom. The names Dahmer and Gacy shot through his mind and he decided it would be safest to assume the worst. Normal people did not keep severed body parts in the bathroom – or anywhere else in the house, for that matter – no matter how small.

He had to get out of the house and call the police, preferably in that order.

Steve mentally kicked himself for leaving his cell phone on the coffee table downstairs, although there had been no reason to expect that Josh would turn out to be a psycho serial killer or something. He considered searching the bedroom on the other side of the door for a phone, but he had only seen the empty cradle for a cordless and was afraid he might tip Josh off if he was heard rifling around for the handset.

Getting out of the house was the priority.

He stood up from the tub. The bathroom was rather small, even for a narrow two-story townhouse. He pulled aside the sheer curtain covering the window over the tub. The window was big enough to escape through, if not for the bars placed on the outside to prevent people from getting in.

He remembered looking up at the front of the house as Josh unlocked the front door gate for them to enter and seeing the bars on the second story windows. If there were bars on the front, he assumed there would be bars on the more vulnerable windows overlooking the alley.

So there was no way out on the second floor.

Okay, I'm just going to have to walk out the front door.

Josh had dropped his keys on small table near the door. With a little luck he could quickly find the door and gate keys and get out before Josh realized what was happening.

Yeah, just a little luck, he thought. Maybe he'll ask me to run out to his car to grab something he forgot and just hand over all the keys.

Knowing that it might take a bit more effort than waiting for Josh to hand over the keys, he went back to the medicine cabinet to look for something, anything, to defend himself with. The best he could come up with was a small pair of scissors and a slim metal nail file with a plastic handle. Neither seemed at all formidable as a weapon – they were both fragile and dulled from use. He left them in place, hoping that if he needed a weapon something better could be found downstairs.

Steve reached down and grabbed the blood stained tissue paper lying next to his left foot and gingerly picked up the finger with it. His spine shuddered in revulsion, sending small sparks through the base of his skull. Keeping himself steady, he carefully placed the finger back into the medicine cabinet, then moved the mouthwash bottle and other concealing items back to their original positions. Out of habit, he flushed the toilet to provide the illusion that his visit to the bathroom had been legitimate.

He closed the door of the medicine cabinet and stared at his reflection in the mirror. His pupils were mere dots of black barely standing out in the dark brown of his eyes. The whites were slightly bloodshot, the primary physical evidence that he had been out that evening having a few drinks and dancing in smoky bars. His short brown hair was mussed in spots where the night's sweat had weakened his gel. He took a deep breath and whispered to himself.

“Just pay attention. All you have to do is get out of the house. Don't panic, stay calm, you can do this. If I get through this, I will never look through another medicine cabinet again.”

He took another deep breath and left the bathroom.

The staircase was an open one, descending ungracefully from an opening in the ceiling like a collapsible attic ladder. No banister guarded the edge of the steps, which were made of new but cheap wood, shiny with polyurethane coating. The living room itself was unrelentingly white. Steve had been able to tell immediately from the

undistinguished prints on the wall, the pale gray carpeting, and the utilitarian layout of the first floor that these elements weren't design choices – they were hallmarks of a fast remodeling effort with the goal of quickly renting a rundown house.

As he neared the bottom of stairs, Steve saw Josh sitting on the simple black couch, feet propped on the glass coffee table and eyes closed. A halogen floor lamp dimly lit the room. Steve had a brief glimmer of hope that Josh was asleep, that escape would be easier than he anticipated, but that glimmer dissipated when Josh opened his eyes and spoke.

“Oh good, you didn't fall in,” Josh said, the smile spreading across his face revealing rows of gleaming teeth. “I thought I was going to have to come up after you.”

Adrenaline pumped through Steve's veins, urging him to rush for the door. He tamped down the urge and forced himself to return the smile as he stepped off the stairs.

“I had to go worse than I thought,” he said. He stopped a couple of feet from the couch, unsure where to go next. “Too many drinks tonight, I guess.”

“Not too many, I hope,” Josh said. “I was about to make myself a vodka tonic. Want one?”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Not too strong though.”

Josh stood up from the couch.

“I'll try,” he said. “But I'm known for making strong cocktails. Why don't you sit down? I'll just be a minute.”

Steve shrugged and moved toward the couch. He managed not to cringe when Josh touched his back lightly as he passed. He sat in the spot Josh had vacated.

Josh winked, then turned and walked toward the kitchen. He maneuvered past the large table that took up most of the space in the dining area and passed through an open door at the end of the room. The kitchen light switched on. Steve could see part of the kitchen counter through the door and heard the clinking of glasses.

The couch served as a divider between the living room and the entryway, one of the more common Ikea design tips for the young, newly-middle-class professional.

Against the wall behind him was the table covered with mail and papers where Josh had tossed his keys after they entered.

“So, what do you think of the house?” Josh called from the kitchen.

Steve got up and moved quickly to the table.

“It’s great,” he said, loudly enough for his voice to carry into the kitchen. “When did you move in here?” He started rummaging through the papers, hoping the volume of their conversation would cover up the sound.

“About six months ago,” Josh said. Ice clattered into glasses. “I couldn’t believe how hard it was to find a place I could afford that didn’t look like crack house.”

Steve lifted a messy stack of bills and found a silvery pool of coins underneath. No keys. “Yeah, finding a good place is hard.”

A short, crisp hiss as a bottle of tonic was opened.

“I like it here, but it sucks how they remodeled the place.”

Steve made absent-minded noises of agreement as he felt through more of the papers.

“The kitchen’s pretty nice, though. The last place I lived, the refrigerator barely worked, but everything here’s new. I don’t understand why they would rip out the half bathroom down here, though. At least they put another one in upstairs.”

Under a delivery menu for a Chinese restaurant Steve saw the glint of silver key teeth.

“Did you lose something?”

Steve yelped and jumped back from the table, sending pieces of paper fluttering to the floor.

Josh stood next to the bottom of the stairs, a drink fizzing merrily away in each hand. He wasn’t smiling.

“Jeez, you scared me,” Steve said. “I was trying to find my cell phone. I can’t remember where I put it.”

Josh waved a cocktail in the direction of the living room.

“It’s right there on the coffee table.”

“Oh, yeah, there it is,” he said. “God, I’m so ditzy sometimes.”

“Do you need to call someone?” Josh still wasn’t smiling.

“I just wanted to turn it off. They always ring at the worst times,” Steve said. He let out a laugh that he prayed was convincing.

“I thought maybe you wanted to call a cab and leave,” Josh said. “Or maybe you were just going through my things to see what you could find out about me.”

“Well, I’m guessing you order Chinese food sometimes,” Steve said. “Other than that, I’d have to open your mail or something.”

Josh visibly relaxed and walked to the coffee table. He set the drinks on the glass and picked up the cell phone. He studied the keypad for a moment, then pressed a button. The phone let out a shrill beep.

“There, it’s off,” he said. “Now we’ve got some privacy.”

Shit, Steve thought. He knows. He’s got to know. Or maybe he likes to play around with his victims first. Isn’t that what serial killers do? Act normal, gain your trust, then rip your throat out.

Josh took his place on the couch and motioned for Steve to join him.

Just sit down with him and wait for an opening. He never went to the bathroom at the bar, maybe he’ll have to go soon.

Steve sat near the opposite end of the couch, leaving about half a seat cushion distance between them. He accepted the drink Josh offered him. As he took the first sip, he realized that Josh could have spiked it with anything: poison, sleeping pills, date-rape drug, anything that would make him unconscious, compliant and possibly dead.

He forced himself to swallow, hoping that the small amount in his mouth would have no effect, and hastily put the drink back on the table. He wondered briefly if he should just ask to leave, gracefully back out of the situation. It wasn’t the most polite thing to do, cut and run on someone you picked up at the bar, but it happened.

Have you forgotten that this guy's a psycho? he thought. *He's got a severed finger in his medicine cabinet. You think he's going to unlock the door and help you into a cab? You don't leave something like that around unless you want someone to find it.*

"So, did you like the upstairs?" Josh asked.

"Uhm, yeah, it's really nice," Steve said. From the corners of his eyes he searched for something, anything, that could be used as a weapon.

Josh reached out and lightly stroked Steve's hand.

"Okay, so this conversation part is awkward," he said. He was smiling again.

"Don't worry about the phone thing. I don't think you were trying to *spy* on me. Anyway, if you were, you're not very good at it."

Panic and nausea welled in Steve's stomach as Josh gently massaged his fingers, making him wonder if he had too much of the drink.

"I'm too clumsy to be a spy," he said.

"Well, there are more ways to be a spy than snooping around," Josh put his drink on the table. He raised Steve's hands to his lips and lightly kissed the fingers. "I bet you're better at those."

Steve's mind blanked as Josh moved to embrace him. With gentle pressure, Josh pressed Steve backwards until he was lying on his back, Josh's weight pressing against his chest. Then there was a tongue in his mouth and his mind did a rough jump start.

Steve pulled his legs onto the couch, and Josh straddled them, never taking his mouth from Steve's. Thinking *Oh god oh god let this stop please*, Steve reached up with his left hand and ran his fingers through Josh's cropped hair. His right hand felt carefully along the edge of the coffee table, searching.

Josh broke the kiss, running his tongue down Steve's cheek, along the jawline and to the neck. Steve tilted his head as if to give him better access to his neck and earlobe – now he could clearly see the coffee table. His hand was just an inch or so away from his drink. Condensation gleamed on the side of the glass.

He felt Josh's hands running along his chest, pausing to tweak his nipples.

Then sudden cold and wetness as he wrapped his fingers around the glass.

Josh raised up over him, using his arms to prop himself inches above Steve's face.

"You know, I was kind of worried there for a minute. I thought you might be one of those—"

His eyes went wide, breath and spit flying from his mouth as Steve's knee slammed into his crotch. He jerked upright, his hands reflexively moving to the front of his jeans as if he could push the pain away, and the glass smashed into the side of his head, shattering. Glass and liquid sprayed through the air like heavy confetti.

Struggling up from the cushions, Steve shoved Josh onto the floor. He pressed himself against the back of the couch, not sure what to do next.

Now he's going to kill me.

Josh rose awkwardly from the floor, his left hand pressed to the gash that ran from his temple across his cheek, blood flowing between his fingers.

Steve pulled his knees to his chest then pushed out hard, his feet catching Josh square in the gut. Josh fell backward, part of a scream escaping his throat before he hit the coffee table.

It shattered beneath him, an explosion of small chunks of glass. He hit the floor with a heavy thump, his head bouncing once on the carpet and then becoming still.

I did it. I can't believe I did it.

Steve stood up, his body shaking from excess adrenaline. He poked Josh's leg with his foot. No response.

Now, get the hell out of here.

He spotted his cell phone lying amidst the broken glass. He reached down to grab it. Just before he touched it he saw Josh's eyes open.

He jerked back without the phone and almost fell over the couch. He quickly regained his balance as Josh pulled himself to a half-sitting position on the floor.

Josh reached behind his head as if to scratch – his hand came away covered with bright, fresh blood. He looked up at Steve with wide eyes. His right pupil was larger than the left.

“Please don’t kill me,” he said, his voice whispery and quivering. “Take whatever you want but please don’t kill me. Don’t hurt me anymore.”

He shook his head slightly as he continued pleading. He looked down at his blood covered hands. He started to cry.

“Please don’t kill me.”

Oh shit, Steve thought. What did I do?

He moved warily to his left, putting a little more distance between himself and Josh.

“Don’t hurt me anymore, please.”

Steve knelt, bringing himself eye level to Josh.

“I found that thing in your bathroom,” Steve said.

“What thing?” His tears cut tracks of white through the blood on his cheeks.

“In your medicine cabinet. I found the finger.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Josh’s breath hitched and he let out a small cough. “Please, don’t hurt me anymore. I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll do anything you want.”

The sound of grating metal came from the door as the front gate jerked open. Steve jumped up in surprise.

What the hell?

Josh screamed and seemed to launch himself from the floor, coming at Steve’s legs with his bloody hands and twisted face, his eyes filled with anger and terror. Steve kicked out, his foot catching Josh just under the chin, throwing Josh’s head back in a vicious snap. Steve felt the popping of bone through his shoe. Josh fell clumsily, crumpling in a heap atop the glittering pieces of glass, his head at an unlikely angle.

The front door opened.

A man stepped inside. He was about Steve's size, blond hair, pale face, wearing a bulky green coat with too many pockets. He stood in the doorway, glancing at Josh's body on the floor, then at Steve, then at Josh again. He stayed in the doorway.

Relief started to make its hesitant way into Steve's muscles.

"Thank god," Steve said. "You've got to call the police."

The man didn't move.

"What have you done?" he asked, his voice strangely calm.

"He was going to kill me," Steve said. He could feel his own voice moving toward hysteria. *He thinks I'm the psycho. He thinks I'm going to try to kill him.*

Steve held out his hands.

"You've got to believe me," he said. "I found a finger upstairs. A severed finger in the bathroom. He was psycho, I thought he was going to kill me."

The man reached behind him and pulled the front gate shut. Before Steve could react, the man pushed the key into the lock and turned it. He pulled the key out, stepped further into the house and closed the door.

"What are you doing?" Steve tried to move back but his legs had gone cold, numb.

"So you found it," the man said as he used another key to throw the deadbolt on the door. "Damn."

Steve's head began to shake back and forth against his will as realization crept over him.

"I left that there for Josh to find," the man said. "The nosy little fuck. Never should have shared a place with him in the first place."

He casually tossed the keys onto the small table by the door.

Steve stood there, wobbling, unable to move. His bladder felt strangely full.

"So much for tonight's plans," the roommate said. Then he smiled, revealing a set of perfect large teeth. "Shit, you didn't even realize it wasn't his bathroom."

The roommate laughed and reached inside his jacket. He pulled out a long, serrated and silvery knife that seemed to catch all the light in the room and reflect it straight into Steve's eyes.

“Looks like I have two boys to play with tonight.”

A warm wave of wetness flowed over Steve's thighs as the roommate advanced and he had time to think *I'm so sorry Josh* before the first silver stab.

It was the first of many.

THE END

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