

The Man at the End of the Hall
By Danny Cove

Down the hall of the shabby hotel, I see a man staring at me. At least, I think that he's a man. He's so far away that I can barely make out any details, causing him to look almost like a silhouette. It could be the vast distance between my end of the hallway and his, or it could be the cheap and shoddy lighting that fails to illuminate him properly, but the way he's standing, the height of him, and some deeply-felt instinct all tell me that this strange figure is a man.

My heart is beating fast, but I take a few breaths to calm it down, to catch my breath and come back to my senses. My hairs stand on end as I lock my eyes on the visage staring at me, that unmoving, unmistakable outline of a human being. When I'm calm, I slide sideways beyond the corner and brace my back against the cheaply painted and garish yellow which is peeling off the wall. I don't care that the paint is shedding on my shoulders, or that the even the plaster behind it is leaving faint trails of white dust scurrying down my arms and chest. At this moment, all I care about is avoiding the man down the hall.

After a few more minutes, I build up the courage to turn the corner and I see that not only has the light gone out in the lone bulb swinging callously halfway down the hall, but the man has vanished as well. I breathe a sigh of relief, but I still don't want to go near that door at the end, don't want to pass that frame in which he stood. So I turn and instead take the hallway to my left. Its walls are chipping away as well, but at least its light is on, showing me the exposed stud in the wall about a third of the way down. Unfortunately, it also shows me a clearer view of the man standing at the end of *this* hallway, still unmoving, still staring. Before I turn away, I try to get a clearer view, noting how his clothes seem to be as shabby as the hotel, all dark with glistening stains barely visible in the weakening light. I can see glasses on his face, thick-rimmed with thicker lenses. His hair is still indiscernible, blending into the shadows cast around him. But

this all becomes invisible as the light down this hallway also dies, and I'm left with yet another black tunnel to be avoided.

I retreat and take a third hallway. This is dimmer, but the light manages to remain, and I take off at a slight jog, trying to make it down to the end, hoping that perhaps this is the way out. The bare lightbulb seemingly stuck into the ceiling shifts a few inches as I pass beneath it, casting deep shadows which morph along the crumbling walls. I turn my eyes as I pass by the end of that hallway and veer left again, going about twenty feet before I stop and turn around. There, standing in the spot which I had just passed, is the same man, the lower portion of his body disappearing into shadows as the upper portion faces me half-turned. His shoulders shake slightly, as if some terrifying anger is welling up inside him, and his hair stands at odd angles, looking oily as if drenched in sweat. His eyes are still hidden behind those thick glasses, but they're pointing at me, staring at me, bearing down upon me.

I sprint away from him and veer around another corner, praying that this is the way out of this place, but it isn't; I'm met only by yet another indiscernibly familiar hallway. My feet slow before stopping directly beneath the bare bulb. I'm covered by a wave of frustration, thinking that even one covered bulb would give me a point of reference in this labyrinth. Exasperated, I slide down to the floor. I bring my hands up to my face and, for the first time, notice the blood etched in thin rivers across my knuckles. I don't remember being in a fight, but, then again, I don't remember coming to this hotel either. I stare at my hands, hoping they'll awaken some memory, of the hotel, of the strange man stalking me, of what mistake of fate has brought me here. But the more I reach out for my memories, the more they seem to pull away, as if taunting me with their infinite possibilities. *Have I fought the man, injuring him in some way? Is he stalking me for vengeance?*

I look down at my shoe and notice the tiny piece of glass embedded in the sole, not enough to punch through and stab me in the foot but enough to remain firmly attached to my sneaker. I pull out the glass and peer into it. *Does this have something to do with how I got here?* I ask myself. *Perhaps I crawled through a window, assaulted this man and tried to escape down the hallway, only to become inescapably lost in this condemned fleabag of a hotel.* The theory gives me at least a little bit of comfort, some order in this confusion.

Suddenly, my muscles tighten and I feel something icy in my chest as the man appears in the glass shard. Dropping it, I leap to my feet and run before he can catch me. I can't imagine how he managed to sneak up on me so quietly, but what I lose in stealth I more than make up for in a panicked run. I turn down one hallway, then another, each one looking identical to its predecessor.

At last, I come to a stop and rest. I look behind me and see nothing, just the empty hall with its single source of light. But then I glance to my right, and I see him. He's less than two feet away, staring at me through the frame which meets the corner between two halls. At this proximity, I can barely make out the eyes behind the glasses, and without thinking, I ball up a fist and take a swing at the man, wanting to take him down before he has a chance to do worse to me. I feel a sharp thud, then a clattering sound and the image of the man cracks and breaks, falling to the ground around me. Some of him still remains on the wall and I punch with my other hand, causing more glass pieces to rain down upon the stained carpet. I stomp on some of these shards and one becomes embedded in my shoe, but I ignore it as I stumble away, my heart beating faster than it ever has before. Panicking and exhausted, I stumble away from the mess.

I turn a corner and see something off in the distance, but I can't see it clearly. I adjust my thick glasses and it becomes clear. Down the hall of the shabby hotel, I see a man staring at me.

At least, I think that he's a man.