

**The Tunnel of Love**  
**BY**  
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Waking from dreams about red-eyed men who could inflict cancer just by looking at people, she made a decision to give up sleep. She shambled through the process of getting up, showering, making and drinking her morning tea. She then cycled the two miles to her counsellor's office for her nine o'clock appointment. It wasn't a bad trip, nearly all uphill on the approach and down on the way back. They'd been talking for half an hour when they heard the rattle of wheels and an elderly woman passed by the open doorway, pushing a trolley. She glanced in curiously at them both. "Morning," she said, as she disappeared. It was an afterthought.

Ever polite, she said, "Yeah, good morning."

Turned and looked at Emily who said, "Maybe we should shut the door. That was a bit surreal, wasn't it?"

Going through the day – dealing with the ordinary, mundane and necessary – was something she could do if she had the right music. With the right music she could function. It was straightforward enough: simply playing the same song over and over until that endless repetition had formed a wall behind which she could hide if necessary. She knew what she did, and she knew the reasons why without feeling the faintest desire to modify her behaviour. It was, she explained, the reason why cognitive therapy didn't work for her. Her psyche worked in the same fashion as the swallows and house-martins, who would be arriving later in the month. They went backwards and forwards sticking the gobs of mud against a surface until the first stuck and dried and could be added to.

In the dream world she'd run away from the cancer killers by scrambling down a muddy slope and crawling into a tunnel. She knew a little about Freudian explanations, which was why she was glad that Emily specialised in person-centred counselling.

On a scale of one to ten for badness, that morning had been at least an eight. Waking up depressed meant waking up clumsy. Washing up the breakfast things – the inane procedure of cleaning a mug and a cereal bowl – she'd broken a glass left dirty from the night before and cut her hand. This was tricky: it was always a challenge when glass broke, but now she had a ritual to observe; the breakage had been – joyful addition to the day – an accident. Now she must collect up all the pieces, one after another, and wrap the remains up in newspaper: she might be a self-harmer but could not expose the bin-men to harm. Sometimes the ritual demanded a sacrifice: in the process of tidying

up she had stabbed her right index finger with a piece of glass that left in its wake for a moment nothing but a faint impression.

She sat and watched with consternation as – nearly a minute later – the blood broke through. Twenty minutes after leaving the flat, cycling hard because she was running late, the blood was still seeping through the bandage. She hoped that if Emily happened to notice the insignificant injury that she'd know nothing intentional had been done.

There are some people – being one, she knew the score – who should never be allowed near sharp edges. This thought ran through her head as she jammed in the earphones and set the volume on the portable player to between 7 and 8 before starting off. The music was loud enough to shut out the world.

Five minutes into the session, the sweat from cycling still drying on her back, she said, “Last night wasn’t good. I was back in the tunnel.”

“Do you want to discuss the tunnel again?” Not really: she’d rather discuss almost anything else.

But at last she said, “There is a point to this.” Emily waited. “I met Connor at school.”

She’d met Connor at school. They’d been some distance apart, in academic terms: he stood on the school’s much-denied top echelon, while she balanced precariously one rung down, wanting to be smart and not succeeding. A step down from Connor’s class of college-bound academics she had one or two decisions to make: would she select the practical world over the cerebral one, and take cooking instead of Latin? Another rung down and they’d have denied her all the languages, and would instead have taught her to type. Connor, on the other hand, coped admirably with every academic demand, and fell apart – almost heroically – in any activity that required any coordination.

But of course, there was a very good reason for that.

“Was there a reason for that?”

It was too far-fetched and yet she’d believed him immediately when he’d told her the story of his past: abandoned to medical science as a baby, he’d been used for drug experimentation. By the time he came to be adopted by the nicest people either of them had ever met, the damage had been done. As a result of the drugs that had been tested on him, and the violence he’d suffered at the hands of the laboratory staff, Connor fell prey to moods so furious and overwhelming that they’d drive him to beat his head against the medieval flint walls of the town. When she finished the sentence she looked down at her

hand to where the blood – which had finally stopped – had soaked through the bandage.

That was what he'd told her, in the confidential phase of their early days.

They'd become friends at the end of the second year, when the future swung in the balance. Come September they'd begin the run up to the exams that would affect so much of their immediate future. If there was a cusp that both were hanging on to, they let go of it together.

The friendship that revolved around alternate visits – him to her home in the leafy second-best part of the town (she seemed doomed to rank second forever) and her to his dark and gothic home in the countryside – lasted from July to September.

Connor had achieved a kind of hectic status at the comprehensive school they'd both attended, before the first term was done with. Generally known as the werewolf, his face sheet-white, his dark brown hair cut en brosse and sticking out at every conceivable angle, his heavy eyebrows meeting over his nose, too tall and without any coordination at all, he might be seen lurching down the corridors with his heavy briefcase held before him like a bomb or a battering ram. His voice – on the verge of breaking – sounded like the call of a rare but not attractive water bird. A night heron perhaps, scared from its perch by barking dogs. She'd had first noticed him in the end-of-term play, when he took the role of a very camp film director, all green eye-visor, silk cravat and flowing white shirt, marching about the stage with that same lurching walk, crying out (the heron voice again), "There is nutting! Nutting!"

She met him by accident, taking refuge from rain and company, in Mr Lime's classroom. Mr Lime was a rarity: a teacher prepared to offer up a peaceful lunchtime haven to anyone wishing to last out the hour in an environment free of smoke, bullying or sex.

There were only ever four of them there. As the only female the others accorded her a kind of unearned status that went with her skirt. Connor would be discussing poetry with Mr Lime or painting the sets for the next school play. His two friends equally quiet but by no means so apparent, became a kind of Greek chorus. The four of them lasted out that summer term in an atmosphere that was almost easy and never threatening.

The tentative friendship between her and Connor continued without thought or hesitation into the summer vacation that followed.

Everything that went wrong happened a day before the end of the vacation. Since Connor's arrival at her house at half past ten it had been raining. It had never struck her – until that day – how much time they'd spent outdoors and at an easy distance from one another. That day, and for the first time, she found

herself awkwardly aware of how small her bedroom was. Connor's height made him the biggest thing in the room and she was beginning to feel overwhelmed. She'd played kissing games with other people, but had never thought of Connor in that light.

The ease that had been the most notable aspect of their friendship was in no way present that day: the hours seemed awash with an inevitable contact that scared her. The moment it stopped raining, she leapt to her feet and suggested a walk.

"I couldn't sit there with him any longer. Everything seemed to have changed overnight. I had to get out of there, and I felt stupid for wanting to."

"Why do you describe what you felt as stupid?"

"Because... Because when I look back it all looks so simple and so clear that I can't even begin to explain why I was that naïve. But I was."

"But you were. Don't devalue that. Do you want to go on?"

She hadn't given him time to comment or react: she'd grabbed her coat, forcing Connor to grab his. They went out into the windy afternoon. It was late summer: the blackberry bushes carried green fruit, the air smelled wet and perfect.

"We started walking. I don't know if he tried to hold my hand. No. I remember that he didn't. The first path we took was too narrow, a bridle-path. Wide enough only for horses and their riders."

She'd known the area like the back of her hand, but still led them – unthinkingly and unknowingly – into the only area for miles around that had a 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' sign nailed to a tree. And why was she stupid enough not to realise that they could have just turned round? That was all that they needed to do: turn round and go back.

"That didn't occur to you?"

"It never occurred to me."

The fear of authority that would successfully fuck her up over and over again was out in force that day. She panicked, and her fear caught up with Connor, too. Group hypnosis, but they weren't a group. She saw the tunnel entrance and in a flash of realisation and relief, saw a way out.

“There was a ditch. Maybe the old route of a river. I don’t know. But there had to be allowance made for the water when it met the embankment, the railway embankment. So they’d tunnelled through and floored and roofed it.”

She slid down the wet, grassy slope to the valley bottom and stopped at the tunnel mouth. A couple of hundred yards away she could see a small circle of light.

They started off, with her leading the way. The tunnel was too narrow for them to walk in tandem. Not very high, either: Connor had to hunch up so as not to crack his head. That was one of the anomalies they’d have to address at a later date.

“After a few feet the roof seemed to dip a bit. I was walking zig-zag style, a foot on either side on the rivets that jutted out.” The rivets that stuck out at an angle, two or three inches long, and placed at regular intervals. A third of the way into the tunnel where the metal sides gave way to old brick, they saw that a single brick held the carving of a fish, a simplistic fish but a wholly identifiable. The fish faced the direction of their exit, plain and pale in the muted afternoon light.

“We talked about going back with a torch to maybe see it better.”

They kept on moving, testing the rivets for strength, sometimes slipping, their feet splashing into the deep and narrow puddle that ran the tunnel’s length.

The hollow sound that rang out when her foot struck the large off-white and vaguely round object didn’t make them stop to think: it spurred them on. Moving quickly, splashing carelessly, they emerged into the simple resolution and security of the open air. The sky above them was beginning to brighten, There were patches of blue above them.

“It’s always the stupid last thing that does for everybody. Lot’s wife and all that stuff. You know you can’t look back but there’s no real story unless you do.

“It was strange: the fear evaporated in the light.” She smiled. “Nobody ever quits when they’re ahead. In the fresh air there was no fear, only curiosity. What if it was a skull? What a thing to find.”

The world was normal again, and the sun warm on their faces. They turned around and faced back into the tunnel with the light behind them.

That was what made it so bad. Because the sunlight was behind them it couldn’t be coming through the back of the creature’s skull to send the cold blue light towards them. Besides, the thing was solid: a ceiling-high beast,

dog-headed and filling up the centre of the tunnel. There was less than an inch of space on either side of it. Its ears were pricked and narrow and just touching the tunnel roof. The light from its eyes was long-dead, and its muzzle, long and thin, seemed to point at them. They cut and ran, desperately, stupidly, without comment of any kind, cutting hands and crashing oblivious through the dark green patches of stinging nettles.

She'd met him several years later. He must have been home on a visit. She'd been walking briskly along the narrow streets but she stopped dead when she saw him. He was taller than ever: his brown hair was dyed black, and his skin was whiter still. He looked sunless, bloodless, hardly there at all. When he took off the dark glasses that had been concealing his eyes, she saw that the pupils were tiny and stupid.

He was wearing a long black leather coat that dropped down to the tops of his boots. When he recognised her – a beat later, maybe two – and spoke, his voice was still as harsh as the cry of a gull. Throughout their conversation he never once looked her in the eyes.

He mentioned college. He said that he was into experimentation: men, women, drugs, tutors and students, good times and bad. Alcohol and drugs. He preferred night to day, philosophy to literature.

His words fell into the air in lumps, in guttural, almost incoherent sounds. He looked constantly over his shoulder and hers like a man pursued by demons.

Aware that it sounded dull, aware that he wouldn't care anyway, she told him that she was working, that she had an undemanding job in a local office. He muttered something about a need to feed the masses. She didn't really understand him. Then she glanced at her watch and said something about needing to go, and he giggled, unnervingly, and said nothing.

She reached the end of the street before spinning round and running back. She found him outside one of the charity shops. He was looking through a box of second-hand books and seemed disconcerted by her return.

"I asked him about the tunnel. I asked him what he'd seen that afternoon. I thought that maybe he remembered better than me. I told him that it had given me nightmares. He looked at me – looked past me, through me – and then he denied having seen anything. He said that he'd reacted to nothing more than my fear that day. He hadn't seen anything."

She saw him again later still, after he'd become a poet. She knew that he was living in a squat in a cloud of cigarette smoke so dense and steady that it dyed the ceilings nicotine yellow. He'd dropped out of college. She was about to begin. He had no plans for the future. Nor did she.

“You never went back into the tunnel?”

She thought of the image of Connor beating his head against the flints. She imagined broken glass on the floor and heard the over-loud music still ringing in her ears and said, “I think maybe we never left it.”

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