

Hide-and-Seek

by Jim Schicatano

She can't see him, but she knows he is there.

His presence is overpowering. Her situation is desperate. She strains to follow his movements as the raging thunderstorm continues to unleash its mighty fury – swallowing all other sounds around her. Blackness engulfs the town in the valley below. The electrical power is gone. In the darkness, she hides from him.

She is conscious of his movements and attempts to determine his whereabouts from her hiding place. He is only several feet away. She must be silent and patient. If she reveals her location he will surely kill her.

She is paralyzed from fear; numb from pain. She is hot and sweaty, cramped in a position which hinders all movement. Her breathing is erratic and consists of short, quiet pants. Tears run down her cheeks as she endeavors to silence her sobs. She must not be heard over the storm.

The residents in the valley below have long since taken refuge from the hostile elements. There will be little movement until the storm has ended. No one is likely to save her. Only one of them may live to see dawn. Having little choice, she accepts that possibility. But she is still alive and that is the only fact that matters.

She prays he will leave – but so far her prayers have been unanswered. He continues to search for her; the nightmare persists. How can she continue to endure?

A violent, clap of thunder – her heart skips a beat. She yearns to move; she wants to scream. But stillness and patience remain her best defense.

He continues to search the room. He looks under the bed; he searches the closet. Surely, he is insane. Why does he want to kill her? What did she do to deserve this ordeal? There must be some mistake – some misunderstanding. Perspiration trickles down her forehead as he virtually destroys the room.

"I'll find you bitch, and when I do..."

She shudders, shaking her head in disbelief. This can not be happening. It is too incredible – too horrible.

But it is happening. She must accept it. She must deal with it.

Despite her desperate situation she realizes that she has an advantage.

"I can hear him," she thinks to herself. "I always know where he is. That's the difference. That gives me the edge."

The wind howls and the torrential rain beats upon the window behind her, as the late, summer storm continues into the night. She strains to hear his movements. The storm is too loud, however, and she can hear only mother nature.

"I must hold on. I have to."

Yes, it can be done. But she is hot and cramped and soaking with sweat. She has become lightheaded and unable to concentrate. Overcome with exhaustion, her mind begins to drift and she recalls a game from her childhood. It was an innocent game that she used to play with her brother and sister. They searched the entire house for her but were never able to find her. She was simply too clever. Whenever they played hide-and-seek, she would hide in this clothes hamper and cover herself with dirty laundry. She never lost a game. But the innocence with which that game was played now seems so remote as she finds herself in the same position – in the same hamper. Only this time she is playing hide-and-seek for her life.

She is unable to hear him. "What is he doing?" she wonders.

Something is going to happen. She can feel it. She desperately struggles to listen but the storm is too loud. The uncertainty is terrifying.

Her head pounds; she needs fresh air. Her body aches; she needs to move. She realizes the next second may be her last.

"I must have faith."

She prays for deliverance. Her entire life will be devoted to God if He just allows her to live. She pleads for mercy.

Clothing surrounds her head. They are damp and smelly. The darkness of the hamper frightens her. Her blouse is soaked, completely drenched from perspiration. She has difficulty breathing; the air is too stuffy. Her eyes are useless in the pitch black, but her remaining senses more than compensate. Her hearing is particularly sensitive.

The hamper cover may open any second. The dim light and cool air will momentarily revitalize her weary body and then it may well be over.

She must have a plan.

"Go for the eyes," she reasons. Yes, that's what she'll do. That's his most vulnerable spot.

There is a momentary lapse in the storm. She can hear him again. Something is being opened.

"My God, this is it. It's the hamper. I've got to jump up – surprise him!" She remains still, nervously anticipating the confrontation. She has known all along that this moment would come and she is mentally prepared for it. She waits, ready to spring. Nothing happens.

She remains in the hamper, motionless and confused. Where is he? Over the roar of the storm she can hear him opening the dresser drawer next to her. He wasn't opening the hamper after all. Things are being violently thrown across the room as he continues to yell obscenities at her. Certainly, he has searched the entire room by now – except for the hamper she occupies. He must be satisfied that she is not here. When will he leave?

Another clap of thunder startles her and her body jolts backward against the side of the hamper.

"Oh my God!" she says to herself. "How could I have done that?"

Certainly, he must have heard her move. He was standing right next to her when it happened. She fears for her life now more than ever. This is it. She has revealed her hiding place.

"Oh, God help me," she pleads. "Let me think clearly. Please, dear God, anything You want. Just help me. I've got to think – quickly. Please, I have to get out of this!"

Her situation is desperate but her faith remains strong. She ceases praying momentarily, intent on discovering a solution. Something is coming into her mind. An idea is on the tip of her tongue.

"Wait a minute – the scissors! Yes, they're right on my dresser. They have to be. I used them earlier. I couldn't have put them away. Yes, they must be. It'll work. I've got the element of surprise on my side. He'll open this hamper any second. That's when I'll get him."

Enveloped in darkness, numb from pain and exhaustion, incoherent from apprehension, she envisions her attack.

"The hamper flies open, startling him back a step. I throw clothes on his face. His hands desperately reach for me but grasp only air. He is disoriented. I look on the dresser. The scissors are exactly where I

left them. I grab for them, raising them over my head. I come down with them, aiming for his chest, using every muscle possible to make the wound fatal. But it is stopped! He stops it in mid air! His hands are wrapped tightly around my wrist. He yanks at my arm. The scissors fall harmlessly to the floor. He grabs my other wrist and holds both of them over my head. I am his, completely helpless. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a knife. It is over! He grunts and then begins to laugh at me. His insane laughter will be the last sound I will ever hear. The knife is raised over his head, then it surges downward, swiftly... powerfully... victoriously!"

Her body jolts forward. The hamper rocks with her. She clutches her chest. It burns and aches but it is not bleeding. The last encounter had been a product of her imagination. Outside, the downpour has subsided into a gentle shower. Thunder rumbles in the distance but the storm is no longer above her. Her hair and clothes are drenched in sweat. Her breathing is erratic. Her heart is pounding. She has never felt so terrible. But she is still alive and still safe, at least for the moment. He continues to search for her; but he is searching the room next door.

It is the moment she needs to collect her thoughts and regain her strength. She cracks open the hamper about an inch, allowing the cool air to nourish her body. She takes a deep breath and tries to regain her composure. Her eyes search the top of the dresser but the scissors are not visible. She was wrong. A new plan must be devised.

Lightning continues to illuminate the sky. She peers out the window behind her. The valley below remains ominously black.

"I can't make a run for it," she thinks to herself. "I'll never make it to the nearest neighbor. It's just too far." She feels the muscles in her legs. They are weak and numb. "I can't outrun him."

"God, how can I get out of this alive? I can't stay here much longer. The pain is terrible. Please, get me out of this somehow."

There is a crash in the hallway. Something was smashed – probably the hallway mirror. He is angry and nearly as violent as the storm outside. He must be deranged. Somehow, somehow, he wants to kill her. He wants her to be punished for whatever he believes she did to him.

A door flies open down the hall. "Dad's old room. I've got to do something."

There is a momentary silence. The air is heavy. The suspense is draining. Her options are few. Minutes seem to pass. There has to be a way out of this. Something is stirring in the back of her mind. She

struggles to concentrate. Is it something about a gun? It is coming to her. She is becoming coherent. Yes, it is a gun. The feeling grows. Deep inside, she searches her memory.

"Yes! In the closet! Dad used to keep a gun in the closet. How could I have forgotten that? I'm sure it's there. It's got to be. It's in one of the shoe boxes."

"But it's been years since I last saw it. Where is it? Which box is it in? Back in the corner box. Is that the one? I just cleaned up there a couple of weeks ago. I don't remember seeing it."

She is uncertain of the gun's location and she was wrong about the scissors being on her dresser. Nevertheless, she feels it is worth the risk. She must get to that gun. She will no longer hide. He has put her through hell and she will tolerate no more of this ordeal. It is no longer a matter of survival; now she seeks revenge. She massages her legs in anticipation. Will they be strong enough to hold her? They feel too numb to support her weight. She may have to crawl to the closet, but whatever it takes, she is determined to end this.

The thunder begins to grow louder as the storm intensifies. The torrential rain pounds on the window behind her. The room remains ominously engulfed in blackness. It will all be over in a few minutes. Only one of them will survive this ordeal and she has every intention of leaving this room alive.

Suddenly, there is a crash in dad's old room. Something metal was knocked over. What is it? What could it have been? "Oh my God," she realizes. "The metal hamper!" Certainly, he will figure it out now.

With renewed determination she massages her legs even faster. Her entire body is on edge. There will be no more waiting – no more hiding. It is time. She is ready to make her move.

"Oh Lord, be with me!"

She boldly leaps out of the hamper and falls instantly to the floor. Her legs are simply too weak to support her. Her head strikes the hard, wooden floor and she is dazed from the impact. Her legs will not move. Her body is numb beyond belief. There isn't a part of her that doesn't ache, but she is determined. She crawls towards the closet.

"Oh dear God," she shouts aloud. "Let me make it!" Tears run down her cheeks.

He smashes something against the wall next door. Now he knows where she is. "Now I got you!" he yells.

She screams in horror, still desperately crawling towards the closet. It seems farther than she had expected. Her arms pull her forward, her legs remain too numb to move. She reaches for a coat. He is in the hallway. Using every muscle remaining in her exhausted body, she manages to pull herself upright. She staggers in the entrance of the closet. She can barely lift her arms, they are too stiff. He is coming.

"Oh my God! Where is it?" She is hysterical, knocking boxes about, searching for that one box with the gun.

"Please, God!" she pleads. Is it even loaded? She didn't think of that. It is too late. There is no time.

He is at the doorway. The moment of confrontation has arrived. Everything has come down to these final seconds. Insanity covers his face. Evil fills his eyes. There is a knife in his hand. He's going to kill her. He laughs and raises it high in the air. Something metal is in her hands. He lunges at her. She screams. There is a shot... a second!

Silence.

Her ears ring from the gunfire and she is unable to hear any other sound. She stands mesmerized for several moments, the gun still held tightly in her trembling hands pointed directly at her antagonist. His dead body lies harmlessly on the carpet in front of her; he can threaten her no more. The gentle tapping of the rain against the window can now be heard, and the storm, which had been raging all night, has subsided into a soft, summer shower. Her hands slowly regain their steadiness and the pain and lightheadedness slowly recede. She is alive. She has made it.

Staring at the dead body, and still unable to move from shock, she begins to cry once again. Unaided, and in the midst of a raging storm, she has ended her nightmare. But her nerves are shattered and she realizes that her life may never be the same. The most terrifying night she had ever experienced has taken its toll.

Exhausted, and still trembling, she opens the window allowing fresh air into the stuffy room. The gentle breeze from the open window calms her, and her teeth chatter as she shivers from the cool air. Perspiration trickles down her forehead and her body is completely soaked, as if someone had thrown her into a shower. She finally lowers the gun and slowly sinks down into the corner near the closet. The gun falls gently to the floor beside her. The house seems especially peaceful. The soft rainfall seems particularly harmless. The darkness that surrounds her is almost friendly.

The anxiety from the evening has weakened her. The police must be notified but her eyes can no longer remain open. They slowly close from exhaustion, but she manages to say one final sentence.

"Thank you Lord." With that, she falls into a deep sleep.