

The Closet

a short story about survival
by Fred Smith



Lisa heard the screams and tried to make herself as small as she could. The closet she was hiding in was pitch black, not much bigger than a phone booth and smelled of bleach. But for now, it was her only refuge from the terror that reigned just beyond the darkness of her sanctuary. The sheer panic that owned Lisa in the moments leading up to now had waned, as she realized the frequency of the screams from the nearby hallways had decreased in the last few minutes. But she was still every bit as scared as when the whole thing began. She could hear her own breathing and wondered how loud it may sound to the outside world.

Lisa hadn't heard gunshots for a while. Five minutes. Maybe more. She couldn't know for sure. The shooting began without warning and turned the school into chaos sometime during second period when Lisa was in the library. She had left her cell phone in the reference section when it began; and for the life of her, she couldn't remember how she got here or how long she'd been in hiding. The bell signaling the end of second period hadn't sounded, yet. Or had it? Maybe she had missed it amidst the screams. She wondered if it was all over; perhaps somewhere in a distant corner of the school, students and teachers rejoiced and hugged each other knowing there was nothing left to fear. Fear, in all of its mental and physical anguish, was still very much alive in Lisa. She knew she couldn't get up. Fear had paralyzed her.

She had fled the library and made her way through the 700 hallway when it began. The hall was infused with kinetic horror. An aimless frenzy of kids and adults bound in a reckless pact of mass confusion, like an anthill that had been trounced by giant with a deadly weapon. No one knew what to do. They just ran. Lisa couldn't run. The fear had taken hold and wouldn't allow her to move any faster than a sloth in a waking dream.

As the halls thinned of people, Lisa slithered her way to the nearest exit. She turned the corner at Mr. Barlowe's room and instantly froze. At the end of the next hall stood a hooded figure dressed in black from head to toe. The figure held a rifle.

Lisa was paralyzed. In a moment the figure would see her and end what had begun with hail of bullets she knew she'd never escape. And so she retreated back down the 700 hallway and slipped into the janitor's closet next to Mr. Barlowe's room. She expected the figure would follow and in a moment open the door to her chamber. She kept the lights off and desperately tried the lock the closet, realizing then she needed a key. So she settled on the floor and waited. And waited. And waited.

She hunched on the floor wishing she could melt into its surface when she heard the doorknob turn. The door opened slowly, spilling a shaft of light into the closet. Lisa held her breath and tried to be still. Knowing she could never face the end with any kind of view, she closed her eyes and waited for the penetrating shot that would vanquish her fear forever. Each passing second was agonizing, a teasing killer's sadistic attempt at humor. But the end never came. Instead, the door closed.

Lisa opened her eyes to blackness. She could hear ragged breathing other than her own and knew she wasn't alone in the closet. She stayed perfectly still.

Minutes passed but felt like hours. The halls were quiet now. The two strangers in the pitch-black closet were silent, with only Lisa aware that she wasn't alone. The knowledge comforted her, though she didn't dare give herself away. The darkness seemed to slow time to a standstill. How long had it been? Maybe it was over and the gunman had given up. Maybe someone would come through the halls and announce that it was over, that everyone could come out now, as though this had all been a game of hide-and-seek. Lisa listened with hope. Then she heard two more shots.

She flinched, causing the shelf behind her to flex—a stumbling reaction Lisa wished she could take back knowing she had given herself away.

"Who's there?" The voice was thin and frail with uncertainty, though clearly male. Lisa remained silent.

"Who is that? Answer me! Please!" Lisa's unseen companion uttered in a strained voice. Trying to be quiet, but wanting to shout. Its timbre carried a desperation that Lisa could sense was deeper than her own.

"I'm here," whispered Lisa, trying to sound warm and reassuring. "I'm sitting on the floor."

"Who are you?"

"It's Lisa Capehart. I'm a sophomore."

"The door won't lock."

"I know," said Lisa. "It only locks with a key."

"How long have you been here?" The voice was still gripped with fear.

"I've been here the whole time," said Lisa, "since the shooting began."

"Who did it? Who did the shooting?"

"I don't know. I saw someone, but I don't know who."

"Who? Who did you see?" His level of panic was rising.

"Who are *you*?" Lisa thought familiarity might make them both feel better in the darkness. Yet her question was met with silence.

"I'm Lisa Capehart," repeated Lisa, this time with an intense focus on being calm. "I'm a sophomore. Who are you?"

"Ricky. Ricky Sampson. I'm a ... I'm a junior."

"You're a free safety on the football team, Ricky. You had three interceptions last year and were second team all-conference."

"How'd you know that?" Ricky's panic had turned to genuine shock.

"I'm on the yearbook staff," said Lisa. "I was looking over this year's stats when..." She trailed off. "...When all this began."

There was silence for a moment.

"I don't know you," Ricky said.

"It's OK. You know me now." Lisa let out a sigh that calmed her and seemed to ease Ricky, if only for a moment.

"I'm gonna hit the lights," he said.

"No!" Lisa managed to keep her voice at a low whisper. "They can see that from the hall. Leave it off."

Ricky complied, but Lisa could now feel his physical uneasiness hang between them, creating an even more desolate mood that neither of them wanted to acknowledge.

"Lisa?" Ricky sounded calmer, though Lisa wondered if the darkness helped their situation or made it more uncertain. "Is there room on the floor?" Ricky sat before she could answer and Lisa could sense his presence next to her. He was still a stranger, but she felt safer knowing he was now by her side.

"I saw someone," said Ricky in a struggling low voice. "I saw someone ... get shot." Lisa listened, not wanting to hear the rest, but knowing she had to for Ricky's sake. "It was Jeremy Skoelnick. I was running through the 900 hall. I turned into the 700 hallway, and he was there. Standing in the hall. He looked at me. Like he was scared. And then it was like his chest exploded. But he just looked at me. Even when he was on the floor, he looked at me. He reached his hand up to me. And I ran. I ran and I hid in here."

Ricky was in tears. Lisa could tell. She had known Jeremy Skoelnick since the fourth grade, though they weren't friends these days. They weren't anything now. Jeremy was dead. His mother didn't know it yet, but Lisa did. His lifeless body was probably still in the 700 hallway, just outside the closet she and Rickey shared. Jeremy Skoelnick. He was always smart. Good with computers, and funny. Lisa had Geometry with him in the ninth grade. He understood the proofs and theorems that had baffled her for most of the semester. He was smart .

"Did you know him?" Lisa quietly asked.

"I made fun of him last week," Ricky fought back more tears. "I don't even know why. Something he was wearing, maybe. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me." Ricky couldn't fight the tears anymore. He cried and Lisa listened.

"I can't get his face out of my mind. He just looked at me." Ricky's whimpers grew louder. Lisa knew she had to do something or they'd both be found.

"Ricky, listen to me." Lisa's voice was steady. "I knew Jeremy. We talked yesterday. He wasn't hurt by you or what you said. He didn't have any hard feelings." It was a lie, but it made Ricky feel better.

"I'm sorry," Ricky's sobs regressed to a snuffle. "I'm so sorry."

"Ricky," Lisa tried to sound as sincere as she could, "I know you're sorry, but we have to be quiet. We just have to be quiet and stay here until it's all over"

They leaned into each other in silence. The halls were now ghostly quiet and Lisa tried to occupy her racing mind by replaying the images from when it all began. It was second period and she was in Yearbook. Tuesdays were research days; and on this morning Lisa was in the library at one of the computers, looking at football stats that she might use in the layout for the upcoming annual. Everything seemed so normal. The library was quiet, just as it had been on every Tuesday of the year thus far. Then she saw Jenn Rogers run past her table like a flash. Then Lisa fell back in her chair like something had kicked her. Then she was up and in the hallway, moving against the grain of panicking student body. Then she was staring at the figure. Then she was lying on the floor in the closet. She started to shiver.

"Are you OK?" Ricky asked.

"I'm cold," said Lisa. Ricky tried to put his arm around her. It was an instinctive reaction. An attempt at comforting her more than anything else. Lisa cringed at the touch, prompting Ricky to quickly withdraw his arm.

"I'm sorry," Ricky blurted, "I just —"

"It's OK. It's not you."

"What the hell is this?" Ricky said aloud to himself. "Why are you all wet?"

"I'm not wet."

"Wait a minute." Ricky sprang to his feet and hit the light switch, which harshly illuminated the closet in a flickering instant, causing Lisa to squirm. Ricky looked at his hands. They were covered in blood.

"What the...?" He looked at Lisa on the floor below. She writhed in pool of her own blood, her clothes stained red. "Jesus, you were shot?"

"I'm OK. Turn off the light."

"The hell you are. We can't stay here. We've got to get you to a doctor."

"No! We have to stay here."

"Lisa, you've been shot. I don't know how bad, but you've been shot. And it ain't gonna get any better if we stay here. We've got to get you out."

"I can't," Lisa's voice trembled as tears rolled down her face. "I can't walk," she whimpered in a barely audible rasp. "I can't walk."

Ricky dropped back to the floor and put his arm around Lisa, who buried her face in Ricky's chest and sobbed. Ricky held her until her heaving gasps slowed down.

"Lisa, listen to me." Ricky was calm as he spoke, "There's a first aid kit in Mr. Barlowe's classroom."

"No."

"It's just at the end of the hall."

"No."

"I'll only be gone a minute."

"Don't leave me."

"I'll only be gone a minute. Then I can help you."

"Please, don't leave me." Lisa held him tight, refusing to let go. Ricky stood and pulled away until Lisa had no choice but to give up her grip.

"I'll only be gone a minute. You can time me." Lisa imagined he smiled, aware she would have no way to know for sure how long he would be gone.

“Ricky—,” her voice trailed off. Ricky slowly turned the knob and cracked the door open enough to assess the hall. He could see Jeremy Skoelnick’s body between the closet and Mr. Barlowe’s room, and knew he’d have to look in Jeremy’s eyes again. He glanced back at Lisa and saw she had slumped to the floor. Her prone body was fading, and Ricky couldn’t help but think she didn’t have much time left.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said. Lisa summoned every ounce of strength she had to impart one final request before Ricky ventured into the unknown to save her life.

“Turn the light off, please.”

Ricky took her in and hated himself for thinking this could be the last time her ever saw Lisa. Then he turned off the lights. She didn’t have long, Ricky thought as he stepped out to the hall and closed the door behind him, leaving Lisa guarded only by the hauntingly familiar company of darkness.

She had no way to know for sure how long Ricky would be gone, so she started to count. First in her head, then continuing aloud. “...eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen ... thirty-four, thirty-five ... seventy-nine, eighty, eighty-one ... one hundred eighteen, one hundred nineteen...” Two minutes had passed. Then she heard a gunshot.

The shot was close. Closer than it had been before. Lisa wanted to run to Ricky. She wanted to flee from the closet that had suddenly started to feel like a coffin. She tried to get to her feet and rise to the door, but she couldn’t stand. She couldn’t move. She was bound to the floor and resigned to accept whatever fate lurked beyond the closet. She closed her eyes.

Minutes passed. Maybe hours. Lisa had tried to continue counting, but drifted in and out of consciousness. She opened her eyes as she heard the doorknob turn and was blinded by the flood of light that spilled into the closet. Lisa looked up and saw the figure in black. The silhouette moved toward her. She closed her eyes and waited for the end, hoping it would be quick and without the pain she wondered if she could even feel anymore.

She didn’t see her life pass before her eyes as she thought she might. Instead she saw her ninth-grade Geometry class. She saw a half-worked proof on the board next to what she imagined were congruent triangles. She looked to her left and saw Jeremy Skoelnick, who seemed to understand. He was always smart. It would be over soon. She’d come to accept her

fate and had finally evolved beyond the paralyzing grip her fear had held over her. She felt hands on her body as she rolled onto her back. Then she heard Ricky's voice.

"Lisa! Lisa!" Rickey was alive with excitement. Lisa opened her eyes and saw him. She tried to get up and felt herself restrained.

"It's OK, Miss Capehart." This from a broad-shouldered man Lisa took to be someone who could help. "We're going to take care of you. Just try and stay down. We're going to help you."

"It's over, Lisa. It's all over," Ricky said as he knelt by Lisa's side. She looked at him as the paramedic slid an oxygen mask over her mouth. She breathed slowly, as instructed.

"I told you I'd be back," Ricky said with an easy smile that warmed Lisa. She felt her body lift to the heavens, only to be lowered and then secured onto a gurney.

She wanted to be clever and say to Ricky with a movie star's sarcastic grace, "Took you long enough!" But she couldn't muster the strength, so instead she simply smiled and reached for Ricky's hand.

"You're going to be OK," Ricky said with a tear in his eye that told Lisa he meant it. She wanted to say, "Thanks to you," but would settle for, "I know." When neither would come from her mouth, she squeezed Ricky's hand, looked him in the eyes and smiled.

She knew, and so did he.

