

Fleeing the Darkness by
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I practically grew up at church.

Not in the metaphorical sense, though that is also quite true, but in the literal sense. We were there a lot. In a congregation of about 300 on a good Sunday like Easter, my parents were something of first citizens. They were friendly and well-liked at church, and were always seeming to volunteer to help with various things. They were best friends with the Youth Minister and his wife, so many of the events were youth events, and since I, as an only child couldn't really be left at home that often, and since the babysitter pool was mostly youth group girls, they brought me along. I was somewhere between a rambunctious mascot or the youth group brat, depending on the day.

It was from the youth group that I learned the horrible truth about the church building.

My church building, like most churches I've encountered since those early days, was utterly terrifying if even a single light was off. It was almost like the light switches turned on and off holy sanctity as well as the flickering fluorescent tubes. The older boys clued me in to the virulent urban legends that swirled around our outpost of the Kingdom: hobos living in the attic, witchcraft being performed out back, and the obligatory ghost that obligingly called the building home. Not that we, as good Christian kids believed in ghosts of course. **That just wasn't appropriate for good little Christian soldiers.**

One place, above all the others, was the worst. There was a long hallway bridging the gap between the old and new auditoriums, or rather the auditorium and the "fellowship hall." **Mustn't call them both auditoriums or confusion will reign, chaos unfurl, and all of Christendom and civilization and everything good will collapse.** Or something like that. When the lights went off in the hall, there was a good bet that they were off on one of the two sides, if not both. On the auditorium side, there was the ghost, and on the fellowship hall side, well, there was absolute, all consuming, blacker than the blackest-moonless-overcast-night, darkness. If I were ever caught in that hallway, and the lights were out, well, I needed to run. And I would run as fast as possible towards the nearest light.

I wasn't supposed to run of course. **That was considered highly "unsafe" and thus, Not To Be Done.** But at that age, running was pretty much the default speed. Especially if the lights were out. Or if the serving line for the afternoon meal got going.

Both merited the same speed, which was to say, my normal speed of breakneck, plus an added kick of panic or hunger.

We had eaten at the building that Sunday, and Dad had building lockup as his deacon-ly duty, so we stayed long after everyone else had gone home to Catch The Game, whatever that was. I was almost convinced that Catching The Game was required to get into Heaven, a troubling conclusion since sportsball was not something that could hold my interest. However, before Dad could get on with Catching The Game himself, the building needed tending to, and a light had been left on in the kitchen. Sorry, not the kitchen, the "Communion Preparation area." **Mustn't have a kitchen in the building lest confusion, chaos, collapse, etc.** I'm still not sure why exactly, since Communion wasn't brought anywhere near there. Regardless of its title, a light was on. Probably the work of some child-eating monster, fully equipped with tentacles, slime, fangs, and other horrible bits of mismatched anatomy. No matter the fiendish motive, that light wasn't going to turn itself off. Someone had to do the deed.

Dad had locked the doors on the fellowship hall side already and he had asked me to go grab the light in the kitchen. I was too proud to be given such a grown up job to bother asking where the switch was and how I, at my small size, was supposed to get it. Dad had given me a big boy task and I hurried to do it. He apparently was confident in my abilities, because he kept on walking towards the auditorium and the exit closest to our car. And he was turning out lights on the way.

Uh oh.

I didn't notice the lack of safe and holy light. There was a switch lurking somewhere in the kitchen, and it was my Duty to find it and switch it triumphantly. Trifling issues of monsters lurking in hellish darkness could wait. After all, the lights were still on right now. I sped into the kitchen and paused to take stock. The light wasn't actually in the main kitchen, but back in the storage room that held the cups, plates, bowls, napkins, fridges, brooms, mops, and who-knows what all else. Critically, the switch was on the far side of that room, tucked horribly into a corner. A placement that insured there would be no witnesses. But still, the light was on and that provided a sense of safety that lasted until my fingers found the offending switch and pulled it down.

The light retreated.

It was then that I realized that the kitchen was dark. The fellowship hall was pitch

black, the hallway was mottled darkness, and both, I was sure, harbored horrors unseeable by adult eyes. I quickly fled the storage room, and the kitchen, reaching the tenuous safety of the foyer. The doors leading outside were glass and let in the brilliant afternoon sunlight just fine. I was safe for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't last. Already I could hear the creaking coming from the attic staircase behind me, the blackness of the unlit, windowless fellowship hall seemed to be writhing against the sunlight, lunging whenever a cloud dimmed the radiance of the impossible- to-reach outdoors. I needed to get down to my Dad, preferably before the monsters took notice of me. So I ran.

I could, at the time, have sworn that I felt a chill deep in bones as I ran through every shadow. Not that I would have sworn. **Swearing was BAD. As BAD as kitchens and multiple auditoriums certainly, and worse than running or passing beliefs in ghosts.** There was no way in hell I would have sworn. But I was sure that I could feel the wrongness in every dark patch between me and the saving light. The roiling darkness chased me up the hall, weaving and dodging the intruding sunlight that dared peek through the classroom doors that hadn't been shut all the way. It leapt over the harsh glare from the secondary, mostly unused doors that led to the back property, and slammed into the wall of divine light that still streamed from the foyer of the auditorium where my Dad waited for me, a slight frown on his face.

I grabbed his hand, safe from the darkness for now. He looked down at me, unknowing of the horrors I had just fled, and said quietly:

"You really shouldn't run Matthew. It's not safe."