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MINDSNAKE

By JIM HARMON



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*It isn't much of a secret, but
it's the only one. The trick is ...*

Don't Think About It

By WILLIAM W. STUART

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Tommy wasn't really a timid child. Sometimes he didn't understand things and was puzzled. More often, grown-ups couldn't or wouldn't understand things that were perfectly clear to him and he was more puzzled. Occasionally such things worried and even upset him a little. Then Momma and sometimes Daddy would translate bafflement into silly adult terms and think that he was afraid.

It was that way about the hole in the closet when Tommy was just a bit over three. Tommy wasn't really afraid. Mr. Bear was afraid and the thing did puzzle Tommy. So he asked about it, but he never did get any sensible or satisfactory answers, and that did worry and perhaps even upset him a little.

But he wasn't afraid, even before Daddy finally told him, "Now, Tommy, boy. Don't think about it and it won't scare you. Really, there is nothing there to hurt you, if you just don't think about it. So don't you think about it any more—there's Daddy's big boy."

This certainly was not any sort of explanation. But still Tommy did try hard not to think about it, as Daddy said. And now he really doesn't think about it at all any more. Or about Aunt Martha, either.

The hole was in the closet in Tommy's room. Tommy and Momma and Daddy lived in a not very big, not very new frame house on the edge of the city and Aunt Martha lived with them. Tommy didn't—at least not yet, although there were promises—have any brothers or sisters. But he did have his own room and a family of his own, too. It was the extra bedroom and it had a closet that was cramped and with no light. Tommy liked his room. It was small, with a small bed, and it belonged to him, along with his family of Mr. Bear and Old Rabbit and Kokey Koala. It was also in easy crying range of Momma and Daddy's room and Aunt Martha's room, so if Mr. Bear, who was the timid one, got frightened in the night, Tommy could cry—purely in Mr. Bear's behalf—to bring help. Or

at least company.

Tommy and his family all liked the closet well enough too, except for the shelf that was out of reach even from the "don't climb" stool. The closet was good to hide in or play bear cave or rabbit hole and fine for finding missing toys after Momma had a spell of playing cleaning house.

The day Tommy found the hole in the closet was the week after his third birthday. Daddy was at work. Momma was out shopping. It was a rainy afternoon. Aunt Martha was sitting with Tommy and the afternoon television.

He was in his room with his family and they all agreed as soon as they heard the television coming on strong that it would be a very poor afternoon to waste on a nap. Besides, Mr. Bear's feelings had been hurt by having been somewhat left out of things recently in favor of new birthday presents, now largely broken or tiresome. To make it up to him, Tommy and Old Rabbit and Kokey all agreed to play bear cave in the closet. It was a nice game and going well enough, except for some grumbling from Kokey Koala, who always wanted to argue and claimed that bears lived in trees, not caves.

But then—and it was Mr. Bear's fault for wanting it darker, so he could hibernate—the closet door shut tight. That didn't seem so serious at first. It would only mean a scolding for being out of bed when Aunt Martha would come to open it after Tommy hollered loud enough. And then there was the hole in the closet, back in the corner next to the broken drum. They all saw it and they heard the Ugly Thing talking or thinking at them. It stretched out a part of itself at Mr. Bear, who was the closest.

It didn't grab Mr. Bear, but he was terrified just the same. And none of them liked it. They didn't like it at all. The Ugly Thing couldn't come out of the hole because the hole wasn't big enough yet, but it tried and it was making the hole bigger. And it kept thinking at them, red thoughts, and hungry, as it tore at the edges of the hole. The family all looked to Tommy, so Tommy cried and yelled.

Finally Aunt Martha heard him and came to open the door. Then the afternoon sunlight streamed across the floor into the closet and the ugly red thoughts from the Thing pulled back, far back, so you could barely notice them, and you couldn't see the hole any more, even though you knew it was still there. At least Tommy and Mr. Bear and Old Rabbit and Kokey Koala knew.

After she opened the closet door and carried Tommy from the closet to the living room, Aunt Martha scolded. She wasn't really mad because she had waited until a commercial interrupted her television program before answering the cries from the closet. But she scolded because she was Aunt Martha and scolding was what Aunt Martha did. A really good cry, even one worked up strictly as a service for a companion, takes a little time to turn off. Then, after a few settling gulps, Tommy tried to explain.

"Auntie. Aunt Martha, there's a hole in the cave—in the closet—and there's a Thing inside of it."

He looked at Mr. Bear whom he was holding by one foot and at Kokey, dropped by Aunt Martha on the sofa, for confirmation. Then, quickly, he wriggled down from Auntie's lap. Old Rabbit!

Bravely, Tommy ran to the closet and was relieved. The door was open and, in the gray afternoon light, the hole was still not to be seen. Old Rabbit, who always had a bad temper, was annoyed and snappish at having been left behind. But he was there and all right. Tommy rescued him and ran back to Aunt Martha.

"It was hungry," he continued his explanation.

Aunt Martha, as always, was difficult. "Who is hungry? You shouldn't be hungry, Tommy. You just had your lunch an hour ago. Do you want a glass of milk?"

"Not me hungry." Tommy was impatient. Aunt Martha never seemed able to grasp any idea more complex than a glass of milk or wet pants. Little boys, in her mind, nearly always either wanted the one or had the other. Such things she could and did attend to with a virtuous sense of duty done. But anything else was beyond her.

"Tommy! Are your pants wet?"

Tommy sighed in resignation and wet his pants. It was the only thing to do. Otherwise Auntie would fuss and fume, accomplishing nothing, understanding nothing, for the rest of the afternoon.

Ten minutes later, in dry pants, he finished an unwanted glass of milk. Aunt Martha, conscience appeased, returned to soap opera. Tommy and his family, nap safely forgotten, played away the afternoon—but not in the closet or even, as was usual on rainy days, in Tommy's room. Instead, finding Daddy's old briefcase full of papers, they played office in the family room, with Old Rabbit grumbling about having to be Miss Wicksey, who drove the electric typewriter in Daddy's office.

Momma and Daddy came home together at a bit after five. Tommy took his scolding about messing up Daddy's papers in good part. He had expected it. But Aunt Martha was angry about the scolding she got for letting him, mild though it was.

In retaliation, she said, "Tommy, you were a naughty, naughty boy. And for being so naughty you must take your big bear and your rabbit and the little bear or whatever the thing is and put them away in the closet. And leave them there till tomorrow."

"No! No, no, no, I won't! It isn't fair. They weren't bad. And the Ugly Thing is in the hole and it might come out and it's hungry and—and my family is all afraid."

"Tommy!" Aunt Martha's voice was sharp. "You stop that nonsense and put your toys—"

"Wait. Wait up now," said Daddy, who also lived in the grown-up world, but who sometimes tried to understand things. "What is this about a hole in the closet? What about something being hungry?"

"That's all," said Tommy. "The Ugly Thing in the hole in the closet. It is hungry."

There was more to it than that, of course, but how could a thing like that be explained through a wall of grown, closed minds? There was the hole in the closet. You couldn't exactly see it. You could only sort of feel seeing it and the hairy Thing—at least it seemed hairy and shapeless, or having many different shapes and a mouth and sharp teeth—and it had reached out with something and touched Mr. Bear and would have eaten him too, if he had blood. But then it had pulled back from Mr. Bear and red hunger thoughts came stronger and stronger. Even now, stretching out from the hole where it was hidden there in the closet, Tommy could feel the reaching, greedy thoughts. But he couldn't explain all that.

"There is a hole in the closet," Tommy said again.

But he knew that not even Daddy would understand. Of course Momma wouldn't. Not Momma, who was loving but very busy and just sat so often, dreaming or listening to baby sister that they said was in her stomach, so big and fat now as to leave little lap room. Momma was too occupied looking inward to look out much at Tommy. Daddy, to give him credit, was nearly always willing to look, but there were so many things he couldn't see. Still Tommy had to try.

"The Ugly Thing in the hole. It wants something to eat."

"Oh, Tommy! Such horrible nonsense!" That was Momma. She wasn't even going to think about it. It is a question sometimes whether baby sisters are worth all the bother and trouble.

"Now, Tommy." Daddy was being helpful. "You say there is a hole in your closet? And that there is something in the hole?"

"Well-ll. Sort of." Really, the Ugly Thing wasn't so much in the hole as on the other side of it. But that was close enough.

"All right then, Tommy. Suppose you show it to me."

"What?"

"Show me the hole, Tommy."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"The hole in the closet?"

"Tommy!"

"Yes, Daddy." This wasn't going to work out to anything good and Tommy didn't want to go back to the closet and close the closet door anyway. The Thing didn't eat Mr. Bear because Mr. Bear didn't have blood. But Daddy had and ...

"Tommy!"

They went to the closet. At least, if he was risking a Daddy, Tommy thought, he was protecting Mr. Bear and the others.

"Now where is this hole, Tommy?"

"Over there by the corner." Tommy pointed.

Daddy went into the closet to look. Tommy started to close the door. In the black dark, Daddy would see what Tommy meant about the Thing in the hole. From the outside, Tommy started to close the door. It was a small closet and hardly big enough for both of them.

"Tommy! What are you trying to do? Open that door."

"But—" After all, the hole wasn't there, or scarcely seemed to be there, except in the dark.

"Open it up wider. Hm-m. I believe I do see. Wait till I get my lighter.... Say, by George, I believe you're right. There *is* a little hole there. Looks like a mouse hole."

There it was, as Tommy might have known. Grown-ups will always avoid seeing the important things. Of course there was a mouse hole there, the home of the little old Mr. Mouse with the wiggly nose and the gray whiskers. He had been nice. But he wasn't there any more and Tommy had a pretty clear idea of what had happened to him. That poor little old Mr. Mouse had had blood.

"But, Daddy—"

It was hopeless. "Dorrie! Martha!" Daddy's hunting instinct was aroused. "Have we got a mouse trap? Any cheese? There is a hole in that closet, a little old mouse hole and I'm going to—"

Well, perhaps this would be better than if he hadn't found anything.

Tommy followed Daddy about as he finally located a mouse trap. No cheese? He cut a little piece of meat for bait. Of course Tommy knew no trap would catch the Ugly Thing.

"What in the world happened to my lighter?" Daddy wanted to know. Tommy didn't answer that. But at least everybody even Aunt Martha had forgotten

can't answer that. But at least every body, even that man, had forgotten about shutting Tommy's family up in the closet. For now that was enough.

But later, after supper, after bath, after the shooting picture on the TV, it was time for bed.

"Daddy?"

"Get on to bed now, son. Past bedtime. Hop to it."

"Daddy, I want to sleep with you and Momma tonight."

Well, it was a mighty dark night. The afternoon rain had built up into a real storm. Mr. Bear was terrified. Kokey was scared and even tough Old Rabbit didn't want to sleep in Tommy's room with the Ugly Thing in the hole so hungry and waiting to rip its way out of the hole when it got dark enough—and only the street light outside the room to keep away the dark because they would never let Tommy keep his light on at night.

"My family and me don't want to sleep in my room tonight."

"Now, Tommy, just because it's a little stormy—Daddy's big boy isn't afraid of a little wind and rain?"

"I'm not afraid, Daddy. It's my family. You know how families are. You always say about Momma—"

"Never mind that now. To bed. Your own bed."

"But Daddy, there's the Ugly Thing in the hole! And it's hungry!"

"The mouse?"

Daddy went to look at his trap, switching on the light in Tommy's room. He came back in a minute.

"The little devil!"

Did Daddy know? No.

"The little devil got away with the bait, clean as a whistle. Only a little plaster

dust or something left in the trap where I put the meat."

Mr. Bear shivered. "Now don't be foolish, Bear. You don't *have* blood. The Ugly Thing won't get you," Tommy told him softly. But Mr. Bear wouldn't listen. He was a cry-baby, a scaredy-cat. But to tell the truth—the real, honest truth—the whole family and even Tommy didn't feel too good about it.

"Tommy? What was that you were saying?"

"Daddy! I wanna sleep with you and Momma. Me and my family. We're scared of that Thing." Tommy knew it was no less than his duty to protect them all.

"Oh, now, Tommy! You don't mean to say you're afraid of a little old mouse? A big boy like you?"

"Well, Mr. Bear is—I don't—Daddy! It is there, honest it is, in that hole and it's hungry and it'll come out in the dark and—"

"Tommy! A little mouse! Get on into your room now and no more argument."

Tommy's face began to crumple. If he had to, he would fight this one out all the way—tears, tantrum, kick, scream, gasp, hold his breath and turn blue—

"Now, now, Tommy-boy." Daddy did mean well and sometimes he was even right and so Tommy always did try to do what Daddy said. "Tommy, you mustn't let things like that bother you. If we can't catch the little mouse, forget it. There's nothing more we can do, so just don't think about it. You see?"

Sniff. "No."

"Don't think about it, that's all. There is nothing there that can hurt you, if you just don't think about it. So don't think about it—that's Daddy's big boy."

"Well-ll... And then can we sleep with you and Momma?"

Aunt Martha rang in her nickel's worth. "A boy ought to be ashamed to be afraid of a little mouse."

"It's not—"

"Not what?"

"Uh—it's Mr. Bear that's afraid. Of the—"

"And you just stop that nonsense about those ridiculous stuffed animals, you hear me? Nobody should make such a fuss about a little mouse."

"Momma does. Momma!" Tommy let two fat tears trickle down his cheeks, a warning, but he meant them too. "Momma-a-a, can't we—"

"All right, all right! Stop this stupid wrangling! You know how it gets on my nerves. For goodness' sake, let him sleep with us tonight. Anyway, *I* don't blame him. I wouldn't sleep a wink in the same room with a mouse. Be sure you shut our door tonight. Tight."

"You're spoiling the child," said Aunt Martha sourly.

"Auntie," said Tommy, "I bet you're chicken to let your door stay open."

"Well!" huffed Aunt Martha. "The impertinence! I certainly *shall* keep my door open. No mouse is going to keep me from getting good, fresh air."

Tommy was a very bright little boy. Now, with the door shut in Momma and Daddy's room, and Aunt Martha's door open, he wouldn't think about the Ugly Thing in the hole—waiting for dark, real dark—to come out—and eat.

"All right, Tommy. This once you can sleep with your mother and me. Get on to bed and mind you sleep quiet. And don't spread those stuff—your family all over the bed either."

"Yes, Daddy. And, Daddy—"

"What?"

"I won't think about it now, the Thing in the hole."

Tommy said his good nights. Tonight he even kissed Aunt Martha as if he meant it. And he took his family and he went to bed in Momma and Daddy's room.

He did not think about the Ugly Thing. He went right to sleep, lying at the edge of the big, big bed. Tommy. and Old Rabbit. and Kokev Koala. and even Mr.

Bear went right to sleep.

Outside the wind blew hard and harder and the rain drove down and it was dark. The television reception was bad. Everyone went to bed early. Good night. Lights out.

In Tommy's room it was quite dark with only the faint, watery rays of the street light on the corner swimming in through the rain. In the closet there was a stirring, a fumbling, a tearing and the hole in the blackness grew, was forced, bigger, wider, as the Thing pushed and ripped at whatever was barring it from the warm, red, oozing food it craved; it must have; it would have.

And, in a sudden gust, the wind blew harder still. Somewhere in town, blocks away, a wire fell and blue sparks flashed and crackled in the dripping night. In Tommy's house the refrigerator went off, the electric clocks stopped. The street light blinked once and was gone and in Tommy's closet there was a sudden, mighty surge of effort, a break, and something, not a sound, but something, a harsh and bloody sense or feel of rending greed flowing outward from the closet in a wave.

Aunt Martha, in her sleep, said, "No. Oh, no!"

Daddy interrupted a snore with a strained grunt. Momma whimpered softly and hugged to herself her swollen stomach.

Tommy blinked and was awake. Soothingly, he patted Kokey and Old Rabbit. He squeezed Mr. Bear's paw. Then he slipped his hand into the opening in Mr. Bear's overalls and took out Daddy's cigarette lighter. He knew how to work it. But first he waited.

"Don't think about it," Daddy had told him and he didn't think about it, really. But he couldn't help feeling it. The Ugly Thing was out, clear out of the hole now, and moving. He could feel that and the awful hunger moving with it. Aunt Martha's room was closest and her door was open. Momma and Daddy's room was closed. The Ugly Thing moved fast, faster, and reached out, thirsting, hungering....

From Aunt Martha's room came the quavering wail and from the Thing there flowed a sense of vicious, evil joy.

There it was, but was it enough?

Tommy hugged Mr. Bear once, tightly, and slipped noiselessly from the bed. He wasn't thinking about it, he couldn't, he wouldn't think about it. But he knew what he had to do. He had the lighter. At the bedroom door he worked it. Opened the door a crack; thrust it out. And then, in a little rush, back to bed where he lay quietly, and he didn't think about it, he and Mr. Bear and Old Rabbit and Kokey Koala.

After a little, the sense of feeding hunger was gone and the feel of the Ugly Thing was gone, back into the hole in the closet, forced back by the flickering yellow light of the flames started by the cigarette lighter. Then, when the smell of smoke grew thick in the room and he could hear the crackling of the fire burning the house, Tommy shook Daddy awake.

It wasn't hard to get out through the bedroom window, except for Momma. But she made it all right. And Tommy had a little trouble holding tightly to each member of his family as Daddy lifted him out of the window, but they made it all right too. Of course Aunt Martha didn't make it—how could she? But it was fun watching the firemen in the rain from the Krausmeyer's porch next door as the house and the closet with the hole in the closet all burned up together.

Aunt Martha?

"Funny thing," Tommy heard one fireman say to another the next day, in the sunshine, as they looked over the smouldering ash, "the old bat must have been as dry as dust inside. Twenty years in the department and I never did see a body so completely consumed—teeth, a little bone.... Hey, get on away from here, son! Get along on home with you!"

Daddy and Momma said Aunt Martha had gone away on a trip. Tommy might have known pretty well where she had gone, if he had thought about it, but he didn't think about it. None of his family did. What for? Aunt Martha had had to go away, sure. She went. All right, who missed Aunt Martha?

Anyway, there were lights in all of the closets in the new house they moved to and lots of room for everyone, even baby sister. And there were no holes, not even mouse holes, in any of the closets.

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