

Now it's coming – it's coming. I have no fear. This is not death for me, not death but a new chance. At last, I have this chance to be better – inwardly to be better. Whatever happens, an inner part of me can learn to be better. I hope can stand it, for my own good.

THE FEAR OF DARKNESS

Throughout the many years I have been caving, a tradition has developed. Cavers, upon reaching the deepest parts of a cave, extinguish all helmet and handheld lights. A total dense blackness fills the void, and, for a moment, you strain your eyes with the expectation of catching a speck of light somewhere in the sudden, false night. After several futile moments, however you notice your other senses have heightened. The sounds, smells and feelings often overlooked to this point come into perfect detail now: the texture of the rocks beneath your feet; the smell of dust, sweat, bat guano; the sound of modern material shifting on age-old rock as you attempt to find comfort on the solid foundation. Then your mind begins to question, "What if?" What if a person had to climb out of the cave with no light? Would he find all of the turns and bends that brought him to this place? Would he make it? If not, would a rescue party find him in time? Never once did I enter a cave without this on my mind.

I am finally able to tell about my discoveries and bizarre experiences in a cave not far from my home in Arizona. If you think the following events sound far-fetched, I agree. I have included the relevant text of a journal I have kept of every cave adventure. For the sake of clarity, *my comments, as I reflect back on the experience, are italicized.* I have done my best to convey the thoughts and feelings I had during the entire event. My journal notes begin December 30, 2001.

My caving buddy Matt and I decided to get one more caving trip in before the New Year, so we set our sights on Hupman's Cave. Hupman's Cave was discovered several decades ago when road construction in the area unearthed its entrance. When the cave was first entered it must have been beautiful; but surface dust, graffiti, vandalism, and careless use have diminished its appeal. However, it still held some exploration interest for us. Anchoring from the usual tree, we began our descent into the cave. I went down first and gathered my gear together while Matt came down. I was excited, for, in a previous visit to Hupman's, I had discovered a small passage in the lower portion of the cave with a strong current of air blowing from it creating a howling sound. This time, by enlarging the passage, we'd been able to enter and investigate it.

I pushed my mini-mag flashlight inside the hole and was excited by what I saw. The wall was about 3-5 inches thick, and led to a tight passage that opened only slightly. As far as I could tell, it continued back about 10 to

15 feet. After that it seemed to really open up, although how much I couldn't tell. I remember thinking "this could be a virgin passage!"

Just to get to the crawl space we would have to enlarge the initial opening that was about the size of my fist. Once past the opening we would have a very tight crawl to where the passage appeared to open up. It would take some work, but we thought we could do it. Sitting there in the darkness we listened to the eerie sound of the wind howling from the other side of the passage. We also heard a low rumble from time to time resonating through the rocks.

Our best plan of attack, we determined, would be to use a cordless drill, then a chisel and small sledgehammer to break up the rock. We would widen the hole big enough to squeeze in and see what was on the other side. I decided right then to name the passage Floyd's Tomb.

Floyd Collins was a caver in the early 1900's who got stuck in a tight crawl space and was unable to get free. It is an amazing story detailed in a book called, "Trapped: The Story of Floyd Collins". Looking back, had I known how long this project was going to take, or what I was going to experience in the cave, I never would have begun it.

A couple of weeks later, Matt and I had assembled what we needed and were excited to get to work. Matt took the first turn at enlarging the hole with the drill. We kept trading off positions. One of us resting, to eat and drink, while the other one worked. After an hour of exhausting work it became obvious we would not break through in one session.

We sat back and took a break. I was then we noticed the howling sound was louder than it had been on our last visit, but figured maybe the wind was blowing stronger outside. We also noticed a rumbling that seemed to come from deep within the passage. This too intrigued yet confused us.

Enlarging the hole became an obsession and, over the next few weeks, we tried to get out to the cave and work as often as we could. The explorer in us wanted to find a new frontier. We imagined the passage would lead to a larger undiscovered cave; one we would be the first to enter. What we finally found weeks later was not at all what either of us expected.

One trip we took along Jedda, Matt's Australian Sheep Dog. I was not at all concerned about taking the dog into the cave, since she'd gone with us before. We used a custom-made harness around Jedda and lowered her until she reached the bottom of the main drop, then she negotiated the rest on her own.

Once we got into the cave this time something bizarre happened I couldn't quite explain. As usual Jedda had begun exploring as soon as we let her off the rope, sniffing and darting around our feet, running from one of us to the other as we made our way back to the work site. As we approached the hole however, the hair on her back stood on end, she began to whimper and hid behind Matt, cowering on the ground with her tail between her legs. She acted as if Satan himself was lurking in the darkness. We neither looked around, nor saw nor heard anything unusual. So we set to working hard to enlarge the hole.

My journal goes on for a while about the progress we made and how the entire time we worked, Jedda did not move. She just laid on a rope-bag, shivering and whimpering from time to time. We should have paid more attention to her intuition and the fact she never took her eyes off the hole. Perhaps such observance would have alerted us to what was to come.

Matt had just finished drilling when he stopped and looked into the hole. I could see a puzzled, intense look on his face and was shaking his head. I asked him what was up. He said he had heard a strange grinding noise emanating from the hole. I believed he had heard something, but I was not overly concerned about what it was. I assumed we would figure it all out once we got through the passage, and I took over drilling. Matt sat in the quiet of the cave for a long time before he resumed work

As I worked, contemplating how close we were, I suddenly noticed the air blowing from the hole had stopped! In all our visits, the air had been a constant force, the last time stronger than ever. Even earlier that day I remember the breeze cooling us off. But now, nothing! Nothing! The rumbling had ceased, too. Bizarre!

I can't believe how casual we were about everything that was happening. At the time, the only thing we could think about was getting into the passage. My thoughts dwelled on the mechanics of the cave where was the wind was coming from, what was making the noise, etc. Now, weeks later, I think of my ignorance, my naiveté, and shiver.

It was three weeks before we were able to return and this time we noticed the breeze from the hole and the rumbling had returned.

I started working first and was on my knees working the drill when suddenly, I heard a strange noise. At first, I thought it was just the squeal of the drill bit, but the noise was coming from inside the hole! I stopped drilling just in time to hear the most terrible scream echo throughout the darkness of the cave. Staring wide-eyed at the hole, I didn't move, or barely breathe. When I was able to turn my head enough to look at Matt, he was standing upright,

mouth open, with a look of fear on his face! At this point I half expected to see a demon's face staring at me from inside the hole, but there was no motion, only total silence and darkness. The only thing I could hear was my own heart pounding in my ears.

Then, suddenly a scraping noise was directly behind me. I swung around quickly nearly knocking myself out on the overhang. It was only Matt moving to turn on his light, yet as he spoke, I jumped again. He stammered that we should get some rocks and build a wall inside the hole to keep whatever had made that noise from getting out. He didn't need to urge me twice. I immediately grabbed discarded chunks of rock and hoisted them through the opening. Using the handle of the sledgehammer, I slid them as far back into the passage as I could reach, creating a wall between "it" and us. Neither of us spoke for quite some time. It dawned on us both at the same time neither the breeze nor the rumbling had resumed. For that matter our own breathing barely had!

From the scream, to the writing in my journal entry two days later, I tried to come up with some possible source of a noise that had sounded like a cross between a man screaming in fear, and a cougar screaming in pain. The horrific noise had reverberated through the cave for Matt estimated to have been eight to ten seconds. I cannot believe we were willing to ever go back into the cave after hearing that scream. Even if it was only an animal, weren't we still possibly putting ourselves in harm's way? In retrospect, I have difficulty understanding our thought process at the time. Maybe we were just too eager to discover virgin cave passages, but more probably it can be summed up with one word - testosterone.

It's amazing what a couple of good meals and restful sleep can do for one's attitude. A couple of days later we were at it again. We cautiously approached our enlarged entrance to Floyd's Tomb. I remember thinking, "well, there's no time like the present" as I stuck my head through the opening. I could move my head freely, but every direction I turned I was staring at a wall of solid rock. I tried to look further down the passage, but could not see past the wall of rocks I had previously built to keep the unseen "demon" at bay.

I pulled my head out, asked Matt for the sledgehammer, and pushed it ahead of me as I slithered waist-deep into the passage. I used the sledgehammer to knock down my rock wall. My headlight illuminated the area beyond the entrance of this passage and it appeared even narrower. I didn't know if I would be able to squeeze through or not. It would be close. I told Matt "I'm going in" and after a brief debate I pushed forward.

The Tomb was just big enough to rotate my head and move my arms forward and back awkwardly, elbows akimbo to facilitate forward movement. My neck soon started to ache from holding my head up, which soon began

to grow heavy. The only option was to rest my face on the cave floor, and even though it was painful, I did it occasionally. It was very quiet in the Tomb, except for my own heavy breathing. Thankfully, the breeze was once again flowing from the passage and helped cool me off.

Struggling in the darkness of a passage deep within a cave, one is in a unique position to ponder. Inhaling, I could feel my back pressing hard against the top of the shaft. A mountain was literally resting on top of me. One tiny shift of earth and I would cease to exist, or worse, would know the fear experienced by Floyd Collins as he lay trapped for days, incapable of freeing himself. Some thought!

Reaching a point where my back was constantly rubbing against the passage ceiling my head began to feel the walls pressing closer. I knew then I was most likely not going to get through and called to Matt, "I'm coming out." Backing out was not as difficult as going in, but it did take some work. We were so close now. As I related to Matt what I'd encountered, our excitement grew. We could feel our "discovery" was in sight.

On our way home we brainstormed and came up with some ideas to help us get through. I remain amazed we could so easily have dismissed the terrifying moments we had experienced just days before.

Three weeks passed before we could get back to Hupman's Cave and we were excited. This would definitely be "the" trip. We vowed we would not leave the cave this time until one of us had made it through the passage. We worked for about 2 or 3 hours drilling, chipping rock and tossing it behind us outside of the hole before I decided it was time to try again to enter the Tomb. This time I took a halogen flashlight. My headlight hadn't been enough before. As I noticed the breeze and the low rumbling were both present.

I felt so alive, so aware of everything. I could see the glow of Matt's flashlight sweeping the passage as the rays of light managed to squeeze past my body. I could feel the cool breeze evaporate the drops of dirty sweat on my forehead. I could feel a thousand sharp rock edges digging into my chest and belly through my shirt.

Then I realized I could raise my head slightly higher and my shoulders were no longer touching the walls - the passage was beginning to open up! I relayed this information to Matt and we both took a few seconds to congratulate ourselves, while I gained energy to press ahead.

Even though the passage was not as tight now, it was still slow going. After what seemed like an hour but was actually only 10 minutes, I suddenly shouted back to Matt, "I've gotten through!" The passage ahead opened up and I was finally able to sit up. I heard Matt let out a whoop!

Matt used the extension pole we had made to slide me the end of a rope, the other end of which was attached to a bag with the rest of my gear helmet, kneepads and camera. As I pulled the bag towards me, I wondered excitedly what the cave had to offer. I could only see the narrow, low ceiling passage immediately beyond the tight entry. I would be able to get through it easily enough, but would still have to crawl.

I strapped on my kneepads, grabbed my camera, and began my adventure. Matt waited outside the passage in case help was needed, and we kept up a sporadic dialogue as I began to crawl through the new passage. At the end of an approximately 20-foot crawl, in addition to having a higher ceiling, the cave was wider and relatively straight.

I was now able to walk nearly upright! I continued like this for another 100 feet or so before the cave opened onto a small room, which seemed about 15-feet high. At the entrance of this room, there was a flat, wheel-like rock leaning against the wall. This seemed odd. Although singular formations are common in caves, and by no means unique, it was more round than others I had previously seen. I took pictures of it from every angle before I moved to the far end of the room where, there appeared to be another passage. My excitement grew. However, I had an eerie feeling of being watched, and suddenly felt very alone. I took several pictures of the room, and was about to try and get a sense of how long the next passage was, when something caught my attention. On the left wall, at about eye-level, was a single drawing that at first glance had appeared to be just natural coloration of the rock. On closer inspection, it appeared to be a very crude representation of people standing below a symbol. I studied the drawing to make sure I could describe it to Matt, took some more pictures, and then headed back.

I had just reached the Tomb when I heard a faint sound from deep within the cave behind me. It sounded like rock sliding on rock. My blood froze in my veins and I couldn't move. I stopped breathing and strained to hear the sound again. Nothing. I quickly went down on elbows, knees and belly and began to scoot toward the exit. The task of getting out of the hole, especially in a hurry, turned out to be as painful as getting in, but at least I was finally out. Matt helped me quickly pull my gear out, and seeing my face, asked no questions until we reached the car.

The next day I took the film a One-hour Development store. The couple of pictures I had taken in the passage leading up to the large room turned out fine. However, none of the pictures taken in the room itself, including those of the large round rock, nor the "hieroglyphics" I saw, were there. Even the negatives were clear! No shadows, no light, nothing. Very strange! I remembered pretty much what the "hieroglyphics" had looked like, so I drew Matt a sketch of the symbol below which were human-like figures with arms raised toward it.

The next weekend found us back at the cave. This time it was Matt's turn for adventure. I couldn't believe how easily he slipped through the passage. As I turned from the hole to get Matt's gear to hand to him, and went from a crouched position to a standing one, I whacked my head on a rock and nearly knocked myself out. Why hadn't I put my helmet on? Bleeding, I fed Matt's stuff through, then feeling dizzy and disoriented sat down where I was and rifled through my pack for the first aid kit.

As I sat there tending my wound and getting my bearings, Matt's light disappeared around the first turn, and I heard him crawling into the darkness.

The twenty-minute time limit we had arbitrarily set for Matt to return came and went. Another 5 or 10 minutes ticked by, but I really had no desire to climb back through the Tomb since and my head was still throbbing. Still, I had to make sure Matt was safe, and was preparing to go back through, when I saw a light deep in the passage. "Matt?" I yelled. Nothing. "Matt!" Still no answer! The light got brighter and I could hear him crawling across the loose rock that lined the cave floor. "You okay, Matt?"

"No," came his weak reply, as he reached the far side of the Tomb. As I pulled his gear bag back through the passage, he inched his way through the Tomb, and quickly slipped back through the entrance hole. He looked terrible. His face was wide-eyed, pale, covered with dust, numerous small cuts and scratches, and out of breath.

He headed straight out of the cave without saying a word. As I quickly gathered our gear, I listened for sounds within the passage but heard nothing. The breeze too had stopped! Part of me wanted to get out of the cave as fast as possible, another part wanted to immediately climb back through to find out what made this cave tick. Chills ran through my body as I realized I could no longer hear Matt, and I scurried to catch up with him.

In the waning light of day, Matt looked even worse than he had in the cave. He headed directly to the car where he sat staring straight ahead, shaking like a leaf. I asked if he was cold and wanted me to turn on the heat, even though it was May. He simply shook his head. Trying to make conversation, I asked if he had seen the hieroglyphics. "No". Had he heard me yelling to him? Did he see the round rock? "No and no". He finally said he had barely reached the room when he started to feel sick. He would not elaborate further.

The rest of the trip passed in eerie silence. As I dropped him off, I asked if he wanted to go back to the cave the next weekends. He shook his head no and hurried into his house. I tried to call him later the same day, and the next afternoon, but only got his voice mail. He did not return my messages. I'd even called him at work and they said he'd been out sick for two weeks.

My head had healed, although I still had a light red line to mark the spot where I had tried to break rock with my head. I wondered what would have happened if I had gone into the passage with Matt. He was a changed man when he came out. I felt I never wanted to go back into Hupman's Cave. It was not a feeling of foreboding. I was not receiving some premonition. Right from the beginning, it seemed like the cave did not want us to be there. Nothing had gone smoothly.

Finally one Saturday morning Matt showed up on my doorstep. He had a serious look on his face as he saying "we're going back in and conquer the damn thing today. Let's go now." I grabbed my gear and new video camera and off we went. Nothing was said about our last attempt on the drive out. AS we reached the cave, I volunteered to be the one to go in.

My trip through the Tomb was relatively smooth. I videotaped the first section of the new passage just to get comfortable with the process. Since I would be unable to tape while I crawled, my plan was to get to the next section, stop, and video what I had just been through, as well as what I was about to crawl through next. I was starting to feel better about the trip, and develop a sense of personal satisfaction at being able to provide a way for Matt to see the fruits of our labor.

Progress was slow, but steady, and things were going well until I reached the round rock where, once again, I got the feeling of being watched. I looked around carefully, saw nothing to be alarmed about, and proceeded to film the entire room. I filmed the round rock from all angles, as well as getting good footage of the wall figure drawing. After I had taped everything to my satisfaction, I moved toward the dark, yet unexplored passage, at end of the room.

The ceiling here was about a foot lower than my head, and appeared to continue on at that height for as far back as I could see. I took a deep breath, and ducked under the entrance prepared to see new sights. The walls of the new passage were darker than the rest of the cave. The floor was made up of the same type of broken rock, some of which looked strangely like calcified bones. The ceiling had the same near-perfect arch as in the beginning section of Hupman's Cave. It almost seemed out of place in this jagged cave atmosphere. I could only see about 30 feet or so ahead to where the passage appeared to make a right turn.

Suddenly from behind me I heard the eerie scraping noise we had heard last trip. It was loud, close and coming from the large room I had just left! As I wheeled around to face whatever had made the noise, I stood up, my helmet crashed into the ceiling, breaking my light, and burying me in heavy darkness. Pain shot through my neck

and down my back, although the helmet had protected my head from cuts this time. Fear enveloped me, my legs began to weaken, and I slowly and involuntarily slumped to my knees. I set the camera down as I began to see stars from the pain in my head and upper back.

Now, the only sound I could hear was my own panic-inspired breathing. Not only could I feel fear thick upon my chest, but also the complete and utter darkness seemed to hold me in place. I felt vulnerable from every direction. I saw black. I was shaking violently as I tried to figure out what to do. I honestly thought I was going to die right there in the cave. Finally, I broke the stupor of terror long enough to reach for an alternate light source, the backup mini-mag in my pocket. I twisted the light to turn it on and nearly cried. The batteries were nearly dead. The dim light illuminated no more than a few feet. I strained to get a glimpse of any movement in the room. Nothing.

Since I had removed as much as possible from my pack to allow for the video camera, the only other light source I had were glo-sticks. I found one, ripped it out of the package, and activated it. Its soft green glow created eerie shadows on the cave walls and provided barely enough light to see the immediate area, with no hint of what lay ahead. I felt the pack for another glo-stick, activated it and threw it in the room.

The throw was a perfect one. As it sailed through the air, I could see nothing but cave walls and rocks that looked like bones. The absence of anything unusual did nothing to ease my state of panic. At the far end of the room, I got a brief glimpse of the round rock before the light bounced behind it and seemed to disappear. I was still shaking, but at least I hadn't seen anything weird. I once again heard the scraping noise. For a fleeting moment, I wondered how Matt would ever know what had happened to me if I never returned. Is this how he'd felt last time?

I found myself nearly sobbing with fear. I knew the only way out of here was back the way I had come, but now something was there! I tried to think of another plan, but could only focus on the grinding sound I had heard. In my weakened state, I slumped against the side of passage, breathing like I had just finished a race, never breaking eye contact with the shadows of the large room. As my shoulder touched the wall, powerful jolts of pain reminded me of my collision with the roof of the cave.

I can't say exactly how long I sat there, but my feet began to tingle and my knees were sore. The pain in my back crept lower, although my neck felt no worse. I resolved to attempt an exit from this evil passage. If I waited too long I would lose what little light and coverage I had. I tried to stand, but didn't have the strength. I crawled to the near end of the large room, dragging my pack beside me. Using the walls of the cave, I was able to slowly stand and, still breathing rapidly, advanced inch by inch through the room. I was staring straight ahead straining for signs of

movement. With every step my light cast ever-changing shadows on the wall, keeping me on edge. My eyes burned. How long had this been going on? The only sounds I heard now were the crunch of my feet on broken rock, the wheezing of my breath. Each turn brought me closer to the Tomb, closer to Matt and safety.

The short distance across the room took what seemed to be an eternity. As I passed the crude drawing it seemed to glow, offering some sort of warning. I didn't yet know what the drawing represented, but everything about this cave seemed to instill fear. Toward the end of the room I could see the round rock dimly in the far reaches of my light. Something seemed different about it, but I couldn't tell what. When I got within a few feet of it I finally realized what had changed. It had moved! Was that the sound I had heard? But, the rock could not have moved by itself. Terror gripped my entire body more tightly as I realized how close I was to something! I had no choice but to continue. I inched toward the rock, holding a glo-stick ahead of me in a shaking hand. I had never felt so alone and helpless. Buried deep within the earth, I believed I might have voluntarily descended into my own casket of solid rock.

My gaze was fixed solidly on the round rock. I went forward, my breathing rapid, my mouth tasting dusty, and my throat dry and aching. With every crunch of the rock below my feet my heart seemed to stop, although no movement could be seen in the green glow of my stick. When I reached the rock, I took several rapid steps past it and recoiled in terror at what I saw. On the far side of the round rock, on the bottom of the cave wall near the floor was yet another hole revealing a small room in the center of which was bones that looked suspiciously human. Obviously it had been covered by the rock, but now it was exposed! How? By whom or what? Why?

I quickly backed away from the hole and collided with the opposite wall. I had not been paying attention to the pain in my back, now it came back to me in all its fury. I tossed in the glo-stick and stared down the newly revealed room or passage. It was illuminated just enough so I could tell it went down at a 45-degree angle and continued straight for as far as I could see. The walls were fairly smooth, as was the floor, unlike the rest of the cave. The passage was about three feet in diameter and would have been easy to explore. At that moment, all I wanted was out of this cave and into daylight. I slowly backed away from the hole never taking my eyes off it. My mini-mag was practically dead, and I wanted to sprint to Floyd's Tomb.

As I turned away from the large rock and the hole, I felt an overwhelming sense of panic fill my soul. I felt as if my salvation lay ahead of me in the darkness, while Satan himself, close behind me, was trying to keep me from it. My only thought was to get out as quickly as possible. Every time I ducked to avoid a rock, I felt my back

scream a reminder of my injury. Where I had to crawl and my hands met the cave floor, I felt an electric shock shoot through my arms and down my back. For the first time since this nightmare had begun, I let out a scream. I crumpled and lay there on the rock, with new levels of pain manifested every time I inhaled. Whimpering, from fear and pain, I tried to listen for any other noise in the cave. I could feel the silence and knew Matt was close, yet still out of earshot.

Forcing myself to move. I no longer checked behind me. My focus was now solely ahead of me. At last, I reached the stretch of cave that lead to the Tomb. As I crawled forward, I yelled to Matt. Thankfully, he answered, asking if I was okay. I literally screamed “No.” When I reached the rope, I ripped off my helmet, shoved it into my pack, and realized for the first time that I had forgotten the video camera. It was a fleeting thought. At that point, I cared no more about it than a passenger of the Titanic had cared about their hat or coat. I tied the pack to the rope, and told Matt to pull it through. Matt peppered me with questions and I shrieked, in a voice that didn’t sound like mine “there is something in this cave with us. Get me the hell out!”

As I clambered through the Tomb, the wind in the passage increased. With it, came the most nauseating stench I have ever experienced. It smelled like rotting, rancid flesh – like death! I started to dry-heave and pulled my shirt over my nose to shield it from the over-powering smell. At this point Matt smelled it too, and yelled, “What the devil is that? Hurry up and get through.” Did he think I was dawdling? As I worked my way through, I yelled at him “go ahead I would catch up.” He found a Glo-stick in his pack, placed it in the passage, and headed out.

This time through the Tomb I had no regard for the tightness, and, even though I was scraping my face, ears, arms and shoulders, I barely noticed. My back was nearly paralyzing me with pain, which combined with the stench wafting on the breeze, created a rising need to vomit. Trying not to breath much, I was approaching exhaustion and my heart rate was through the roof. To compound my misery the scraping noise began again deep within the cave. I let out a cry, which startled me. I was no longer consciously reacting to the noise. The cry was a subconscious response to the fear, which flowed through my entire body. In a panic I began to scoot even more rapidly through the passage. As I reached the largest part of the Tomb I quickly slid my arms under my body to get into a snake-like position to exit. When my shoulders reached the hole they lodged and I was stuck! I dug the toes of my shoes into the rocks, tried again and was successful in pushing my upper body through. Normally I would carefully work my way out, since there is a three-foot drop on the outside of the hole, but this time I kicked and

pushed and pulled unceremoniously plopping out of the Tomb, onto my right shoulder. Strangely, I felt no additional pain.

I rolled over to my hands and knees and stiffly rose to my feet. Thankfully, the stench was much less intense outside of the Tomb but no less frightening. I noticed profound silence once again in the cave, and the feeling of being completely alone almost overwhelming me.

As I reached the small area at the bottom of the entrance, I could hear Matt panting and climbing out as fast as he could, although I couldn't see him. I called out to him and his startled reaction told me he was nearly as tense as I. He told me to start climbing even though he was still on the rope. I stood there looking up at where the rope disappeared into the darkness above me. It danced around like a cobra as Matt made his way to safety. The rope was my lifeline to safety. Behind me were darkness, fear, and the unknown.

I slid the Glo-stick into the cord on my helmet and reached for my harness, which I quickly started to buckle while waiting for Matt to get higher on the rope. But before I could secure it, I heard a strange noise at my feet. My pulse began to quicken. I looked down only to discover, to my horror, the coiled rope on the ground began to unwind and disappear back into the darkness. SOMETHING WAS PULLING THE ROPE BACK INTO THE CAVE!!!

I let go of my unbuckled harness, and began to claw my way up the rope as fast as my battered body could manage. Panic caused me to move clumsily, scraping, bumping, and gouging my arms and legs as I went. Luck was with me and I didn't slip and fall back into the hole. Finally, I could see light above me coming from the entrance.

In my panic I was catching up to Matt, and yelled at him to go faster. It would only take him a few minutes, but every second was torture for me as I waited. I glanced back at the rope behind me; half-expecting to see some creature ascending to make me it's lunch. The rope above moved around a bit in rhythm with Matt's climbing, but did not appear to have any back-tension on it. I kept watching for signs of anything bizarre. I didn't know if my heart could take any more stress. I tried to relax a bit to make sure I was thinking rationally, but my poor brain had reached sensory overload. As Matt reached the top of the last climb I got ready to clip on my ascender, it was then I noticed the rope began to tighten from below. I could feel the back-tension on the rope, but it was a steady pull not like someone was climbing it. Either way, I wanted out as fast as possible. I got up the last few feet in a hurry, unclipped and kept on moving in Matt's footsteps, leaving the rope behind.

By the time I got to the entrance of the cave and daylight, Matt was almost up to where the rope was anchored. I wanted to get up so badly I free-climbed without even clipping on to the rope. I was near total exhaustion but managed to pull myself up the last few feet. The second I reached the top I unclipped the ascender, limped over to where Matt was kneeling down by a tree and collapsed. We looked into each other's faces. I knew I looked pretty bad, but hadn't known Matt was in such bad shape with cuts and scrapes on every exposed surface of his body. He was breathing heavily, his face was ashen and his mouth and eyes were fixed wide open. The shock we shared at the other's appearance was broken when we heard the rope around the tree stretch, the knot tighten. I was frozen in place, overwhelmed with fright. Matt seemed to be transfixed on the knot, but then he produced a pocketknife and began to hack at the rope.

It is amazing how a person's state of mind can alter the perception of time. I'm sure it only took four or five seconds to sever the rope from the tree, but it seemed like an hour. When cut, the end of the rope zipped across the rocks and over the edge of the cliff, making a humming noise as it went. Matt let out a cry, dropped the knife and fell backward. I got up and headed toward the truck while Matt just stood there, wide eyed, staring at the point where the rope had disappeared. I yelled at him, breaking his trance, and he got up and hurried away from the tree, the cave, and the nightmare. Neither of us said a word all the way home.

It took me four days and dozens of attempts to get this entire experience written in my journal. Every time I started to write I recalled the terror and couldn't write anymore. Yet I felt compelled to continue, to document the unbelievable events while all of the details were still fresh in my mind. I can still feel the pain, smell the stench, and experience the terror. I would like to write more, but it will have to wait. Even now, with several days between the events and me, I can't relax. I can barely concentrate.

A lot has happened in the last three weeks. When we left the cave, I was in a state of shock and could not think clearly. I was having a difficult time trying to understand what had happened.

Matt and I parted company and I didn't see him again until yesterday. I was so shaken up from the experience I could do little else but sit and ponder what had happened. I tried to go to work several days after the event, but my boss sent me home. I couldn't concentrate and I looked terrible. Right now I am on long-term medical leave from work. Yes, I've been to a doctor and told him I was under a lot of stress. He recommended rest and gave me a prescription to help me relax.

I was depressed and confused. I was getting all kinds of phone calls but just let the answering machine take them. I even changed the message to tell everyone I was all right. I continued in this miserable state, eating and sleeping whenever I could manage, until a week after the trip, when things turned from bad to worse.

At first I was hearing indistinct sounds in the house that had no explanation. Shuffling noises. Creaking doors. If it weren't for the fact I heard them frequently, I wouldn't even have been sure there were any noises in the first place. Either way, I was scared. It was as though I had been caught in a spider web of anxiety, foreboding, and tension. Next came what I can only call hallucinations.

I began seeing "things" related to the sounds I was hearing. I'd catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye, then see nothing when I turned directly to look. I had been sleeping with the lights on in my room. Now, I kept all the lights in the house on from well before dark to an hour after dawn.

Then I began to see shapes and shadows outside my windows, usually at night. I started to keep my drapes and blinds closed all of the time to remove the possibility of seeing "something". My life was a mess, mechanical and empty. I lost a lot of weight. I left the house only a few times to go to the store and the doctor. I didn't watch much television because I couldn't concentrate.

I also began to have extremely lucid nightmares with no specific theme or recurring events, just terrifying visions. I would wake up in a panic, soaked in sweat and stay awake until exhaustion forced me sleep once again. It was a brutal routine, which reached a climax yesterday. I was drained of energy and spirit and walking slowly from the living room to my bedroom in the early evening. As I looked down the hall, I saw a dark figure at the far end. I thought it was a thief and began to back up slowly. It didn't move, but the lights began to flicker off and on. Every muscle in my body tensed and I froze in place, staring at the figure. Then the phone rang, startling me so badly I stumbled over a chair. When I got up I wheeled around to look down the hall and nothing was there! I grabbed my keys and left the house.

When he answered the door I thought Matt actually looked like he was doing fine, was even somewhat happy. One look at me his disposition changed. I asked him if I could spend the night at his house and he eagerly agreed. I didn't notice until later, but every light in his house was on. He led me to his spare room. "Help yourself." I washed up in the bathroom, took some medication, and got the first decent sleep in a long time. I awoke early and went home without even seeing Matt of thanks and told him to call me.

Crawling head first through a tight passage into darkness and the unknown is as unnatural as climbing up the side of a cliff, or jumping out of a perfectly good airplane for recreation. We do these things to satisfy our hunger for adventure, as a subconscious desire to conquer our own little Everest. Matt once said, "Caving is the last opportunity for exploration for the person with modest means." If you define yourself only by your exploits, by your feats of physical courage, when the time comes that you can no longer perform them, you have lost the standard by which you measure yourself. If I am ever to experience restful slumber, if I am ever to walk the halls of my own home in peace, I must return.

It took Matt another month to recover before he agreed to go back into the cave with me. Neither of us could believe we were subjecting ourselves to the terrors of the cave but we could not avoid it. We spent a little time enlarging the hole to make it easier to get through, stalling for time, working in tense silence. Then it was time. In we went, one after the other, passing quickly through the Tomb. We brushed ourselves off, stood up, and looked around the room. Then, just past the round rock, which had not moved back into its original position, my headlight shown the bones I thought I'd seen last trip. Approaching them warily, we made a grisly discovery

There were shards bone and tattered clothing surrounding skull. Close by was another skull, this one neatly sliced in two, again surrounded by scattered pieces of bone, and what looked like the lacy hem of woman's shredded skirt. Just as I started to approach the remains for closer inspection, I heard a sound that chilled me to the bone. A girl's voice seemed to whisper urgently in my ear, "Get out!" and then an even more desperately, "Run!"

Completely freaked, I turned to Matt who had obviously heard it too. We paused briefly to consider our options, and then began simultaneously to move to the room's exit, just as the floor of the chamber began to tremble. The wind began to howl through the chamber much stronger last time, and the rumbling began deep within the passage. Terrified already, we didn't want to stick around to find out what the hell was about to happen. As I scrambled backwards towards the chamber's exit, Matt quickly followed. The ground was now shaking so badly, I was afraid there was an earthquake and the cave was going to collapse upon us.

I was the first to make it to the exit, which seemed little more than a mole hole now. I started squirming and squeezing through, with Matt yelling for me to hurry. I obliged, skinning my knees and elbows as I forced my way through. Once I was into the passage, I turned to help Matt who was frantically trying to squeeze through. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought the hole was shrinking right before my eyes. Matt had begun to struggle

harder, and I pulled him through with both hands. Suddenly Matt screamed in what I thought was agony from being tugged too hard, but he was looking up at me with complete terror in his eyes.

“Something is touching my legs! Something is touching my legs! Pull harder!” He screamed. I yanked him once more with all my strength, and he finally popped through. As his feet appeared, my headlight revealed what resembled a webbed hand or claw releasing its grip on Matt’s leg. Although it had shape, it was more opaque than solid. The second Matt was on his feet he began running, and as it dawned on me what I had seen, I too turned and ran as fast as I was able. The rumbling noise began to grow louder as a strange glow began to illuminate the passage behind us, and the sickening smell of rotting meat and bile began to overtake us.

As we scrambled upward, the spiraling effect of the passage became disorienting and started to take its effect on us. If Matt wasn’t tripping on something or banging his head, then I was, and the escape to the surface seemed to take forever. It was like a Laurel and Hardy movie scene gone terribly wrong. Since we had ascended high enough through all of the twists and turns, the light from below should not have been visible. Instead it seemed to be getting closer and brighter, now lighting the passage behind in a sickly blood-red light. Finally we reached the long, straight passage that led directly to the cave entrance, and Matt and I were able to pick up speed putting more distance between us, and the light from below and the overpowering stench. However, the rumbling continued to grow louder, and became higher pitched, like a teakettle approaching the boiling point.

As we finally reached the ledge we turned to each other in shock. There was nothing but darkness ahead. We had entered the cave about noon and had only been inside for about 2 hours. It should have still been bright daylight. Matt aimed his headlight up to the cave entrance and what we saw chilled us to the bone. Our rope was gone and the entrance looked blocked. We frantically jumped onto the slope and began to claw our way upward, but for every two feet we gained, we slid back one. The light from below began once more to encroach on us and the rumbling intensified.

We started screaming for help, though who would hear us we had no idea! The light behind suddenly came racing towards us flickering with blinding speed and intensity. We covered our eyes and screamed for our lives. Instantly, the light faded to complete darkness like a wave cresting over. The unbearable noise stopped and the stench faded. The only sound was our own heavy breathing.

“What in the hell was that?” I gasped, trying to catch my breath lost to fear.

“I don’t know, but let’s get out of here. Now!” Matt answered.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than we heard a horrible crash below followed by a sound that still gives me nightmares. Our headlights immediately went dead and we were thrust into complete and total darkness, as a horrific, tortured sound came rushing closer. We were now too scared even to scream. I remember pressing myself against the rock wall, frozen in fear, reduced to no other capacity than to listen as the sound began to transform into more of a primal, demonic scream as it flew up the passage towards us like a freight train going 200 miles per hour. The air grew searing hot and a putrid wind swirled around us. We were about to pass out from fear and the ear-piercing pain of the scream when something semi-solid surged past. Almost reading each other's minds, we shot up the last few feet and through the exit, me first, then Matt. Not knowing whether to run or collapse, we stared at each other waiting for the other to make a move, finally realizing daylight had returned. We sighed with relief, after all things are always better in the light of day. Right? Wrong!

However, our ordeal had not yet ended. A man with long, unkempt hair and deep lines crisscrossing his face appeared out of nowhere. Despite our initial reaction to shake off our immobility and run, there was something about the man that made us stay, something non-threatening almost peaceful. As he approached us slowly, staring at us with piercing red eyes, the screaming came roaring through the woods. Matt and I stood frozen, powerless to stop the thing rushing towards us, powerless to move. The old man stopped his approach, his face one of steely determination. He reached his arms up toward the sky and began forcefully chanting in a language I did not recognize nor understand.

The scream crested the hill embodied in a dark shape, almost like a black cloud of soot, with just enough form to be called solid. It flew down the hill, snapping small trees that stood between it and the old man like matchsticks. The haggard old man blocked the entity's path towards us as he more loudly chanted those strange words that echoed through the woods like the howl of a wolf.

The entity slowed, and, as if it had legs, seemed to take a step back just as the strange light began to emanate from the entrance to the cave again. This time, however, it was not the sickly blood red from before, but a brilliant white light. The entity, or whatever it was, struggled against the light. It was sucked back down into the cave screaming loud in protest. Suddenly, silence as the light retreated into the cave, disappearing as quickly as it had come.

Stunned with disbelief and shock, Matt and I just stared at the old man. Coming out of his trance, he again took notice of us and asked if we were okay. Matt and I both looked at each other as if checking for any number of

untold wounds. Outside of skinned knees and elbows, we were both merely dirty and dripping with sweat, so we nodded numbly in silence.

“You two nearly met your end there,” said the old man.

“Who, I mean, what was that?” Matt stammered.

“It was evil, cruel and eternal. You could call it a demon or you could call it the devil.” He paused for a second and then continued. “It is both and it is neither. What’s important is that it didn't get to feed again. It grows much more powerful if it gets to feed.”

With that, the man drew back, crossed in front of us and began walking. He chanted quietly for a few more minutes, and then walked into the woods. Matt and I stared at each other, eyes wide. Full of questions, yet still too much in shock to speak, we began to search for the old man.

Only a few seconds behind him, there was no way he could have disappeared yet he was nowhere to be found. No footprints and no sounds. We called out to him, even ran up the hill to see further. It was like he had disappeared into thin air.

Now we were thoroughly baffled and confused. As we came back down the hill we found what we were looking for behind a toppled old tree. There, wearing clothes identical to those of the strange man was an almost completely decomposed corpse, holding an old black and white photograph in a rusted frame.

Matt slid it from under the man’s hand and held it up to the light. It was a much younger version of our stranger, with what appeared to be his wife and daughter, standing in front of a nice farmhouse looking happy together. Matt slipped the photo back under his hand, as I noticed something else wrapped in oilcloth lying just under his elbow. I bent over and brushed off the dust to reveal a book. I gently removed it and flipped through the pages. It was a journal or diary of some kind.

“I’ll bet we’ll find some answers here,” I said as I slipped it under my arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I couldn't agree more,” Matt said.

We hardly spoke on the trip back home, each reflecting on what had happened and reevaluating how easily things we had previously believed as true had been shattered by what we had just experienced. When we arrived home we cleaned ourselves up quickly with the garden hose in the backyard before going inside. We each gulped several glasses of water, Matt remarking that we had not returned with our canteen. To this day I have no idea what happened to it or the rope!

Once we felt refreshed and comparatively safe, we sat down at the table with the old tattered journal and began to pour over the pages. Most of the stuff we read concerning the cave we didn't understand at the time, the pages being littered with discombobulated thoughts and gibberish, in a handwriting difficult to read. It wasn't until after revisiting the journal several more times that I was finally able to make some kind of sense of what had happened around that cave.

From what I could tell, the man, his wife and daughter moved into the area in the late 1890's and farmed the land they lived on. The daughter was adventurous and regularly went out exploring the woods, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend, according to her father. One day, she sprained her knee in a fall and had to be rescued, and from then on, her parents insisted she go always with someone else. Apparently, this was no assurance of safety. A few weeks later she and her friend ventured out never to be seen again.

The man and his wife, along with the friend's family, local sheriff, his deputies, and other concerned families, searched the woods that night and all the next week. Despite all efforts, the girls were never found. A month later, refusing to give up, the parents, searching the woods, once again, discovered the entrance to a cave. Fearing their daughter made the same discovery, they decided to enter and look around.

The journal goes on to describe a horrifying scene. Just a few feet into the cave, the mother had found a special ribbon their daughter frequently wore in her hair. It was covered with dried blood. Distraught and overcome with grief, the mother ran deeper into the cave. The man, slowed by an old foot injury, was unable to keep up and begged her to wait until he got help. She ignored him and ran down the same dark passage Matt and I had explored, shouting her daughter's name. Knowing he'd never catch up with her and concerned about maneuvering in the cave, he decided to remain near the entrance and wait for his wife to return with news of whatever she had found. He would never see his wife alive again.

He listened for what seemed like hours as his wife screamed their daughter's name, over and over, and it grew fainter as she descended further into the cave. Just when he could barely hear her voice any more, she let out one long, blood-curdling scream. Closing his eyes in sadness and despair, thinking his wife had just discovered their daughter's body he yelled out to her. He never received a response. What he got instead was a taste of what Matt and I endured.

The journal described a very similar event to the one we experienced, starting with the earthquake-like tremors deep in the cave, which, from his perspective from near the entrance, were much more subdued. He yelled

down to his wife to return, fearing a cave-in as we had, but again, he heard no answer. Then he described hearing a high-pitch wail coming up the passage, a sound he knew couldn't be human. Fearing it was some kind of wild animal he scampered as quickly as he could over the nearby hill, crouching behind a stump to see if anything exited the cave. He heard the wail growing louder and louder and described seeing a sickly red light glowing within the cave. As it faded, a black shape seemed to shoot from the cave like a cannonball, up into the air at least 50 feet, then glided back down to earth.

It had clutched in one of its appendages the one-armed torso of his wife. The man described the almost unbearable horror of seeing this, but was compelled by something beyond his control to watch as the shadow entity fed on his wife's body. Seeming to swim in the blood, it actually seemed to become more solid.

Finally as it registered in the terrified man's brain, this creature had just savagely murdered his wife, and probably his daughter and her friend, he turned in a stupor and began to slink down the backside of the hill. He began to gain speed on the incline and finally, enraged with anger and grief, broke into a dead run, ignoring his swollen and sore foot. Bursting into his house he grabbed his shotgun from the mantle, stuffed as many extra shells as he could into his jacket, then loaded the gun. Bent on revenge, he began the long trek back to the where he had left the entity mutilating his wife. When he finally arrived back at his vantage point on the hill, he could see and feel the entity was no longer around. Carefully he inched his way down the far side of the hill towards the grisly scene just outside the cave's entrance. Blood stained the grass and leaves. Shreds of her dress and small pieces of scattered entrails and flesh were all that remained of his wife.

Overcome with grief, he fell to his knees and began to sob uncontrollably. He remained like that for several minutes, running his fingers through the bloodstained material. Images of his wife and daughter flooded his mind and again he became enraged with a primal anger. He stood up, raised his gun into the air and yelled out to the entity to come for him. He yelled down into the cave, yelled up into the air, yelled at the top of his lungs for it to come. It didn't take long for his call to be answered.

Vaulting over the hill behind him it came screaming, now almost entirely solid. He described it as a thick-skinned, black beast, trailed by a wispy, dark mist coming off it like steam off a campfire doused with water. Its eyes burned a deep red and pierced his glaze like two hot poker. The beast plunged towards him, its arms extended with giant scythe-like appendages ready to slice him in half. He calmly leveled his shotgun and waited to pull the trigger until the last second, when he could feel the beast's hot breath on his face. The creature's upper body exploded into

a cloud of black dust, as its lower body slammed into the man knocking the wind out of him and pinning him to the ground.

It writhed and convulsed on top of him as he struggled beneath its weight. Slowly, it too turned into weightless black dust, falling from him like bits of ash. Eventually he was able to stand up and breathe deeply and as he did so, he felt a strong breeze materialize out of nowhere. Although it wasn't so much a breeze, as it was a force behind him, sucking the air past him. He braced himself against a small tree and watched as the dusty remains of the entity gathered once again into a faint shadow and disappeared back into the hole. He shot at it once again before it left his sight, but his shot simply blew through what was by now nearly a transparent dust cloud and struck a tree. The man ran to the entrance and looked into the darkness, hearing a final faint wail then silence. Minutes later he turned and left the cave entrance in a brain-numbed trance.

According to the journal, he then visited the family of his daughter's friend and tried to explain what happened. Bewildered and nearly despondent by the news their child was likely dead, the friend's mother and father returned to the site with him. They saw the blood and tattered remains of his wife. The friends' father kept insisting that it must have been a bear of some kind, and the event he recounted was merely a figment of the man's enraged grief. Unable to convince them otherwise, he at least got their help to cover the cave's entrance with logs and dead tree branches.

Details followed about the memorial services, about how no one would believe him about the shadow creature. Everyone in the county thought he had lost his mind upon the death of his wife, and he became increasingly more withdrawn until he was essentially a recluse. However, he remained determined to find out what was down in that cave. He spent hours in the town's library, pouring through medieval reference books, the Bible, and even mythology books. Nothing was ever found to describe what he had seen and experienced.

It wasn't until one winter day, months later, that he got his answer. His journal explains that a local Native American, whose parents had stayed behind when their Navajo tribe had been forced off the land onto a reservation in Arizona, had heard of his story and came to visit him. He claimed to know the origin of a shadow creature from an old tale passed down over many years through the generations of his tribe. The creature was referred to as a "Hindi," or "soul eater". A creature of untold origin and power, it hibernated for decades and came out to feed on people's souls only to return to a long slumber after terrorizing nearby humans and animals. His tribe's shamans

had long held incantations and spells to keep the soul eater in check, limiting its power and forcing it to remain dormant for hundreds of years.

Over the next couple of weeks he consulted with an old shaman the man introduced him to, learning spells that supposedly would keep the creature at bay. Apparently, these incantations bound the person to the creature in an eternal struggle against one another. The spirit of the spell-giver would contain the beast as long as the line of living shamans kept up with the spells and incantations needed to keep the spirit alive on its alternate plane of existence. Without maintenance, the spirit would eventually fade and cross over to the next plane, leaving nothing behind to contain the soul eater.

With his family gone and no one in town believing him, he decided to live near the cave to prevent anyone from trying to enter it again. He basically dedicated the rest of his life to protecting the area from any further attacks from the creature and carved symbols of a spell into the cave walls to keep his spirit alive after his corporal death, and contain the entity in its lair.

The incantations engraved into the wall apparently had enough power for the man to return to our plane of existence long enough to once again contain the entity, protecting us from certain death.

After reading his journal and understanding what had happened, Matt and I felt safe enough to return to the area and explore a little more. About a mile past the cave we found two unmarked gravestones. Could they have been the man's wife and child? We never told anyone about our experience. Who would have believed us?

Many questions go unanswered even until today. Where did that evil thing come from? Was it a natural creature of earth, a demon, or some other ancient creature? Are there more of them out there, living the cycle of feeding then hibernating? Who or what recovered the hole while we were in the cave? Was it the spell trying to contain the beast or was it some other force trying to keep us in there for the creature to feed on? Why didn't the beast kill us while it had us trapped instead of breaking through the barrier and coming back for us? All I know is there are things on this earth still left for us to discover and understand. But we had seen, read and heard enough never to enter the cave again.