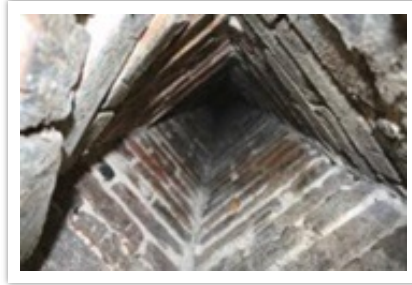


The Chimney Man

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I'll never escape the feeling that I'm being watched. I'll never stop checking my curtains before I go to bed with my wife. I'll never own a house with a fire place. Because for a week in the southern Ozarks, I endured a...well...a being that I have come to call The Chimney Man.

We moved into the cabin in midwinter, a couple weeks before Christmas. Looking back, I realize that the ashen footprints in the living room that my dad threw a fit over probably weren't from the construction crew. We cleaned them, and forgot about them. That night, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched in the shower, that someone was standing on the other side of the curtain. Of course, there was no one there when I pulled it back.

I wrote it off as being exhausted from the move, and I didn't have any more strange feelings for the next few days. But one morning that next week my 6 year old sister said something that would later make me feel like I was about to be struck by lightning. My mother had asked how we slept that night.

"Fine," I said, through a mouthful of scrambled eggs, "don't remember any of my dreams though."

"I played with man behind the curtain." Amelia said, "I told him that he would be in big trouble if he kept getting the rug dirty."

There was no fear in her voice.

My mother just kept on reading the paper, sipping her coffee as she wrote it off as a little girl's dream land.

Later that day, I was taking some folded laundry to my sister's room to help my mom out. I put it in her drawer, turned to walk out, and I saw them. There were two charcoal footprints under the window curtain, as if someone had been hiding there.

I still don't know why, but I never told my parents. I just cleaned them up, rationalized them as footprints we missed on the initial cleanup, and carried on.

I had trouble sleeping that night. I kept looking across the room, into the back of my closet, expecting to see someone standing there. I was 17 years old, and I felt shame for still being afraid of ghosts. I drifted off finally sometime around midnight.

I still can't remember what woke me, I just know that my sheets were soaked in sweat when I came to. I felt again like I was being watched, and just before I could focus my eyes, I looked at my curtains and saw black shoes poking out from under them.

I rubbed my eyes and looked back, and there were no shoes but the curtain was moving. I looked at my door and saw what I swear were coattails disappearing around the corner. I cowered, pulling my blankets over my head, knowing that if I pulled them down he would be nose to nose with me, looking into my soul.

Of course, I got blamed the next day for the dirty footprints to and from my room. They began and ended at the rocks that made up our fireplace. I couldn't bring myself to look inside and up the smokestack.

I scrubbed the carpets that day in a daze, remembering what Amelia had said a few days before at the breakfast table. My thoughts sprinted for a rational explanation, but kept arriving at a strange comparison between chimney ghosts and Santa Clause. After I finished cleaning that evening, I wanted to ask my sister more about her friend from her dream. I walked down the hallway and knocked before I went into her room.

Amelia was sitting on her bed, looking up at the vent that came out of her ceiling. The floor around her bed was covered in that morning's newspaper.

"What's all this for?" I asked as calmly as I could, already having an idea of the

answer.

“For the man behind the curtain!” she exclaimed, “I told him I would help him keep the floor clean...he doesn't like leaving tracks!”

She told me this as a matter of fact, as if she and the “curtain man” had been friends for years and I should know these things.

I almost lost it, my eyes widening and my mouth opening to scorn her. But I caught myself, resolving to solve the mystery. As shameful as it was, I decided to use my sister as bait, to catch whatever it was leaving footprints in the carpet.

“Okay,” I replied as controlled as possible, “just make sure you tell Mom that it's for your watercolors.”

I left with a terrified curiosity, wondering what that night would have in store.

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For what seemed like the 100th time, I lay in bed, unable to fall asleep. I watched my clock tick for seconds, minutes, hours...and then I heard it- the crumpling of newspaper.

I jumped off the edge of my bed with a thud, and heard my sister speak across the hall.

“No! Don't Go!”

I raced out of my bedroom, just in time to see a tall, slender silhouette round the corner at the end of the hall. I followed it into the living room, where I found the twin doors to the fireplace left open, grey footprints illuminated in the lunar glow coming through the sky light.

I stood still a moment, my sister startling me a bit as she came peaking around from behind me.

“Don't hurt him.” She requested.

“I wouldn't be worried about *him*.” I replied.

I grabbed my father's Mag-light from the hallway closet and went back to the fireplace. I leaned back on the fireplace, and looked up the chimney as I turned on the light.

A sheet white face looked back at me, its eye sockets empty and a round black hole for a mouth.

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I ejected myself from the fireplace, and just lay there in the floor, waiting for it to come out after me, but it never did. At some point, I got up, ignoring my sister's questions, as a numb, thoughtless state came over me. I took the fireplace matches, doused the carpet in lighter fluid, and set fire to it.

Epilogue

Amelia and I never told our parents what happened, and I can't remember what happened in the few hours after that. The only thing I can retrieve from that dark memory is sitting out in the snow with my family, pulling my knees to my chest as we waited for the fire department from a distant town. By the time they got there, the cabin had burned to the ground. The fire was attributed to an electrical problem. All that was found in the rubble was a pair of black shoes. My parents don't know who they belong to, but Amelia and I do.

END

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