

THE FIREPLACE

By A. Escobar

I. The Awakening

Her eyes open. Swish..., swish... What is that? Swish..., swish... Is it getting closer? "Jim! Wake up!" she whispers and gently shakes him. Swish..., swish..., louder! "Jim!" A little louder and a harder shake. Swish..., swish... It's getting closer! "James!" she calls out, giving the skin below his underarm a twisting pinch. "Ow! Damn, Trish, what's your problem?" he growls. "Shhh. I hear something in the kitchen!" "Awe shit, Trish!" but he gets up.

He shuffles through the bedroom door into the front room. He walks straight to the kitchen, steps through the door, turns right, and enters the bathroom. He flips the light on cause she complains if he dribbles on the floor. While he's peeing, he glances into the kitchen. It's not an ample space. To the left is a four-burner gas stove alongside a fridge. They share the back wall of the living room. On the right, the sink sits in the center of the outside wall, with a window above it. A countertop and tall cabinets surround the sink and window. He sees shadows cast by the bathroom light flowing into the small kitchen.

Walking to the living room, he stops at the large picture window and peeks around the heavy drapes. The sidewalk that leads to the street is a long grey ribbon that divides the lawn of the vast front yard. No movement, not even on the usually busy street out front. He slips his work boots on and steps out on the wooden porch. Streetlight covers the porch's wooden floor, dominating the tiny house's front. He watches two cars pass, heading east up the four-lane city street. He thinks it must be near one in the morning; who the hell would be out? He walks around to the back of the house. The outside of their bedroom is inset three feet from the alley. He walks the length of the house, turns right, and in a few steps, he's at the window over the sink.

He studies the window; the screen is still intact, and he sees no marks. He looks for footprints in the gravel, but it's too dark to see if there are any. He steps around, and he's back in the front. The grass around the sides and front reveals nothing. *Tomorrow, I'm buying a flashlight*, he thinks. He steps inside, locks the door, and slips off his boots. Trish isn't the scary type. If his wife hears something, he has to check.

Chilled by the late October weather, Jim crawls under the covers and pulls Trish's warm body close. She turns to face him. "I wonder what it was?" she whispers. "You sure it was in the kitchen?" his tone is normal. "Pretty sure. It didn't sound like it was coming from the living room. Not at first!" "What kind of sound was it?" "Hmm, like a hissing sound, or maybe someone dragging newspapers across the door." "Could it be a car driving in the alley? You know our bedroom wall is the backyard fence?" "No, it wasn't a car," she said. "It could've been kids dragging something across the outside wall." "Too

late for kids; maybe a wino or a drunk going home from one of the bars on Second Street,” she counters. They fall asleep confident there’s a natural, logical answer to the strange sound.

II. The Heat

An hour later, Jim is forced awake. He’s soaking wet with sweat, and his throat is so parched he can’t talk. He gets up and stumbles to the kitchen for a glass of water. Trish is sitting up in bed when he gets back. The small bedside lamp is on. “Gees, it’s hot in here!” she says.

He swallows more water and looks at the thermostat. The wall furnace on his side of the bed is blasting heat. “Hon,” he accuses, “you can’t turn the furnace up that high! I’m cooking in here!” “I didn’t turn it up! You were the last one to come to bed.” “Well, somebody turned it up. The thermostat is up as high as it can go.” “No doubt,” she said, “but it wasn’t me!” Miffed, she lay back down and turned away from him, giving him the shoulder, though the room is far from cold.

Jim, too hot to sleep, gets up, enters the living room, and opens the door, letting in the cool Colorado air. The grey sky is shedding tiny snowflakes. It’s Sunday, and he should be sleeping in, not cooling the house down. Trish’s noise has him thinking. He remembers the day they moved in. The excitement on Trish’s face as they unlocked the door to their first place. The three-room house was small and cozy.

The moving day had turned into a semi-housewarming get-together. Their friends had all come to help move them in. Really, there were too many in the small home. Still, it made for a warm and cozy get-together. With so many helping hands, they got the place in order almost immediately. The cupboards were cleaned and stocked with new cups and dinnerware, wedding gifts, and things the wives brought to help Trish. He and Devon, his brother-in-law, had hung the curtains over the very large picture window that dominated the northern wall of the living room.

Across from the window, Maddie, Trish’s sister and self-confessed witch, ran her hands over the small bricked-in fireplace. Seeing Maddie engrossed with the fireplace gave Jim the heebie-jeebies. Chills ran up his spine as he watched her outline the opening and the small, barely noticeable mantel with her black-painted nails. He wasn’t superstitious, but he did feel better when Trish called her into the kitchen.

The hair on the back of his neck began to rise, and he turned to look at the fireplace behind him. Nothing, it just stood there like an unused fireplace. He chided himself and returned his attention to the falling snow. The flakes were falling harder and had gotten fatter, looking like feathers blowing in the wind. If Trish hadn’t turned the thermostat up and he didn’t? Then... No, the answer is clear. One of them turned it up and doesn’t remember doing it. He gets back in bed and snuggles next to Trish. She snuggles against him, and he drifts off to sleep.

Before the kickoff of the first football game they make up, all it takes is his heartfelt apology and his cooking breakfast. Trish is at the sink doing dishes, watching Jim walk around the outside of the house. He's looking for tracks or signs of someone walking on the dirt and snow outside the window. He waves and makes a funny face. She laughs and sticks her tongue out at him.

The more she thinks about the sound she heard, the more sure she is it came from inside the house. She turns and looks around, because she's sure it came from here in the kitchen. Her glance into the living room falls on the small fireplace, and her eyes freeze there. The fireplace is bricked over. That is, the firebox opening had been closed with mortared bricks. The hearth is just a little taller than floor level and almost invisible under the carpet that covers the living room floor. The fireplace has been painted the same as the living room walls, pale blue.

They have lived in the small house, set back from the street, for five months, and have never had any problems until the party. Two weeks ago they had a small get-together at the house, and Jim had gotten a little drunk. One of the visitors had teased him about treasure being hidden behind the bricked-in fireplace. Jim went over to the fireplace and jokingly tapped the bricks with a bottle of Jim Beam and said, "Whatever secrets are in this vault of darkness, I'll find them out and release its riches to the world."

Since then, Trish has been hearing strange noises at night; during the day, she's spent more time out with her mom or her sister, Maddie. Last week, her mother came over with Carlos, her Mexican Chihuahua. The poor dog wouldn't leave the couch and barked into the air as if he could see some invisible being moving around the room. Watching the small dog snarl and bark into empty space had spooked her. "Hey, you okay?" Jim said, interrupting her thoughts. "Yeah, almost done in here. I was just thinking about when all the weirdness started. Did you find anything?" "Nope, but after the game I'm going shopping for a flashlight. You wanna come?" "Sure."

III. The Escalation

That afternoon Trish was called to fill in for a couple of weeks at the local Nursing Facility. A night shift aide was going on vacation. The next two weeks were very busy. Jim, tired and lonely with Trish working nights at the Nursing Home, had taken to having a couple of drinks in the evening. He was still waking up parched and wet with sweat. The thermostat would always be on high even though he knew he hadn't set it so.

One day at work, he mentioned it to one of the foundry's electricians and asked what the problem could be with the furnace. The electrician explained that the old furnace still had a mercury switch. He told Jim that removing the mercury switch would shut the thermostat down. He had one or two too many drinks to try it that night, but he swore after another parching experience with the crazy thermostat he was pulling the switch; he hadn't yet.

The end of Trish's shifts at the nursing home coincided with Jim's day off, Saturday, and the first big snow of the season. He bought a bottle of wine, roses, and her favorite chocolates. He was planning a romantic evening. In the morning, when she came home, he had breakfast waiting for her and hustled her off to bed, to rest as soon as she was done.

In the late afternoon, with the drapes of the picture window open, they sat and watched the snow fall. By early evening, a pristine white carpet covered the huge expanse of grass. During the afternoon, Trish had made his favorite meal: meatloaf, scalloped potatoes, and peas. Two weeks without her around him had definitely made him miss her. After dinner, he helped her with kitchen duty. It felt good to be together. She washed, and he dried. While she was wiping the stove, he got busy sweeping the floor. He opened the back door, which led to a small utility room, and started sweeping. When he came into the kitchen running the straw broom head over the linoleum floor, Trish stopped and stared at him.

"That's exactly how it sounds!" she said, a surprised look on her face. "Like what sounds?" "The noise I was hearing. Before I started work? Remember? I told you I was hearing a noise. That's what it sounds like. Like somebody or something sweeping! Have you heard it?" "Uh, no, I haven't heard anything, but the furnace is still going on by itself," he couldn't help it; he had to come clean, "but Trish, I've been drinking a couple of drinks in the evening, you know? To help me sleep." "A couple, Jim?" "Look, hon I was missing you something fierce, probably more than a few. I probably couldn't have heard a freight train running through the living room."

They showered and dressed for a relaxing evening at home. They sat on the couch, watching the night. The snow had stopped falling and the white blanket lit up the night as it reflected light from the moon and street lights. They kissed, and like lovers all over the world, the kissing started the burning flames of desire. It wasn't long before their ardor took them and they started to remove the clothes that kept them from really being together. Trish pulled back and said, "C'mon baby, let's take this to our bed." Without speaking, they closed the drapes and turned off the lights.

In the bedroom, they started removing their clothes. Trish beat him to it and jumped into bed while Jim struggled to take his clothes off. He was almost there when a knock at the door startled him. "Damn! If it's your sister, I'm going to be pissed," he said. "Leave my sister alone, you ass," she called after him, laughing. With his pants up and not quite buttoned up, he opened the door.

A young woman, maybe twenty years old, stood off the porch in the snow, looking up at him as he opened the door. "Can I help you?" "I need to use your phone! There's been an accident, and I need to call for help!" "An accident! Where?" he cranes his head, trying to see some sign of the accident at the traffic lights that were just up the block. "At the hill, just down from the lights," she said. "Please, let me in to use your phone." "You mean down from the lights?" "Yes."

That didn't make any sense to Jim. That was two blocks away, and there were houses on that street and all the way here; there must be thirty homes closer to the accident than his house. He took another look at the young woman, and something made his skin crawl. There was something about her. She looked okay, but something dark and dangerous lingered around her. "Wait here, and I'll get you a phone, and you can call." "I just need to come inside, please." "If you need a landline, that house there," and he pointed to his landlord's large, well-lit home, "they have one." "Just let me in!" She nearly commands.

He almost opens the door to let her in, but something—fear or doubt in her story—keeps him from submitting to her compelling plea. It just doesn't feel right. "I'm sorry." He closes the door and returns to Trish, shuddering from the encounter. "That was weird." "Did she go to the landlord's?" "I don't know. I'll check."

He opens the door to see in which direction her footprints lead. Shivers ran up the back of his neck as he saw the expanse of snow in the yard had not been disturbed. He steps out onto the porch searching for footprints where she had stood while she pleaded to come inside. No tracks or disturbances mark the snow. If she stood there, where were her footprints? He's questioning his own experience when he looks up and sees Trish at the door. "Where's her tracks?" she asks. "Good question, hand me my boots, hon." "What are you doing, Jim?" handing him his boots from behind the door. "You wait here. I'm going to walk around the house. See if I can find her tracks." "Be careful."

He walks around the house. The alley hasn't been disturbed either. He comes to the porch and pushes Trish inside. "Well?" she asked. "There are no footprints anywhere, babe. It's like she was never here." "But I heard her! You saw her! Jim, what's going on?" She's near tears, and he moves to hold her. She's scared.

IV. The Climax and Flight

That night, the swishing sounds stay in the kitchen. Trish spends most of the night listening to them. She's terrified of falling asleep. What if that thing, whatever it is, comes into the bedroom? Sometimes it would stop for a while. She starts to fall asleep, and the noise wakes her again.

In the morning Jim wakes up parched and wet with sweat. His side of the bed is soaked, and he feels like he's been in a rotisserie all night. Trish doesn't look much better. He turns the furnace down without checking it. He knows it was up to eighty-five degrees, again! They spend the day together away from the house. They go shopping, stopping to eat lunch at a hot dog kiosk, just relaxing and not wanting to go home. Jim has been deep in thought all day. Too many things are happening, things he can't explain. He is still not convinced there's anything supernatural about the occurrences, but he knows Trish is frightened.

In the evening, as he is shutting the house down, locking the doors, he passes by the thermostat and stops. Looking at Trish, he says, "I'm taking the switch out of this thing."

If it goes on tonight, we're getting the hell out of here." He reaches over, pulls the thermostat off the wall, and removes the switch. He sets the switch on the end table, turns the thermostat down, and puts it back in place. As he walks into the bedroom, the furnace flares on! Goosebumps crawl up his spine, and the hair on the nape of his neck stands on end! Shocked, he goes to the thermostat and sees it's all the way up! The switch is sitting on the end table.

"James!" Trish screams! He turns to Trish on the bed. She's looking down at the comforter that is stretched across her legs. She looks at him with eyes full of terror, as the imprint of a large hand pushes the comforter down between her thighs. James reaches down and pulls the comforter and blankets off his terrified wife. "Get dressed; we're leaving!" She throws a heavy robe over her pajamas and says, "I'll come back in the daytime for everything else." She grabs her purse on the way out and tells him, "The coffee pot's plugged in."

James moves to the kitchen to unplug the coffee maker. He pulls the plug and is almost to the door leading into the living room when he senses something behind him. He turns around, looking into the darkened kitchen; he sees a dark shadow. It's close to the floor, blockish. It looks like it's undulating. The expanding and contracting mass captivates James; every time it contracts, it expands a little more. The thing is growing! Two triangular protuberances start growing on top of the mass, one on each side of the rounded top. It reminds him of a cat clock he once saw: a round face with two cat ears and a tail below.

The thing itself seems to be getting bigger; the two ear-like appendages are almost as tall as the fridge now, and a round, ball-like mass is growing between them. He can't tell what it is until the round growing ball shifts, lifts up. It's a head with two red glowing eyes staring into his eyes, freezing him to the bone. His bowels loosen, and he doesn't notice. He can't move. He hears the swishing sound. If he could talk, he would tell Trish it's not newspapers or a broom sweeping. It's the leathery ends of large bat-like wings dragging across the floor as they furl and unfurl. He tries to scream, but a low moan is the only sound that escapes him. He's trapped in utter terror, a victim of his frozen body. Like the victim mouse of some unholy viper, he's mesmerized.

"Jaaames!" Trish's scream breaks the spell and frees him. He turns, running from the kitchen. He pushes Trish out the door, and they stumble off the porch. Holding on to each other, they half run up the long sidewalk to their car parked on the street. He feels the hair on the nape of his neck begin to rise. He turns around, and in the glow of the powerful porch light, he sees both ends of the drapes on the picture window opening, as if something with long arms was pulling both ends to the middle. He stops and looks. "Trish, what do you see?" "Something is opening the curtains! What is it, James?" "I don't know and don't care; get in the car!"

A half hour later they pull into his mother-in-law's driveway. They're both pretty shook up, and it takes a quick shower and a couple of stiff drinks for Trish's mom to wheedle

the story out of them. That night they slept with the lights on. You know, so no one would stumble on their way to the bathroom.

V. Epilogue

Five hundred miles away, a phone rings. "Hello." "Are you available for an assignment?" "Of course, what do you have?" "It's a major energy signature. Non-human, probably a land spirit or greater." "Where?" "Colorado. You'll cover it?" "Yes, send me the details." "Sending an email now."