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Attic Things

by James Lynn Smith

"This one looks pretty interesting," Hal said. "What do you think?"

"Yeah, interesting if you want a haunted house," Julie answered. "Couldn't you find anything less run down?"

"Not in this part of town. Since we agreed to move into an older neighborhood that's beginning to undergo rehab, you don't have much choice. That's the advantage. Buy for less and not only does our home improvement increase its value, but neighborhood renovations will boost it too."

"I agree. It's just that the reality is a bit of a shock. It'll be a lot of work."

"And a handsome sum from our savings. But in the long run, it's a winner. It's got everything you wanted and room for social events and club meetings."

Julie was thankful he didn't bring up the other reason couples want a more spacious home. When they were dating, they both expressed a desire to have children; he especially wanted a son. However, after they married, no children ever came along. The doctor finally announced that such would be very unlikely for her. Hal appeared to take the news in stride, but she wondered if, secretly, he was still disappointed. They had discussed adopting but were still young and enjoyed entertaining so the issue was dropped. Both turned attention to earning and saving for a home that would fit their lifestyle. He worked as a design engineer at a health product firm and she recently ended her city library employment, having a job offer for full time teaching at a local community college. The few months before her job started would allow her time to concentrate on moving into the fixer-upper.

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They bought the old house and moved in with their few furnishings. It was a tall structure with two floors, the upper section under a gabled roof. Part of this section had been made into a guestroom. It was connected by a short hallway to a large unfinished area, closed off behind an attic door and storing unseen items from years of prior ownership. Removal was an issue for a later time.

Trying to establish routines, Hal shared making breakfast with Julie in mornings before he went to work. He buttered the toast slices that popped up and brought them to the kitchen table. “Last night I tried to get the attic door open, but it hit something part way. Light’s out up there and I could barely see in even with my flashlight. There’s a lot of stuff stored up there and it’ll take quite some time to get it out.” He sat, laid his toast to one side of his plate and scooped up a forkful of scrambled eggs.

“We should have done that before moving in,” Julie said. “But we were in a hurry. I think part of it was the realtor wanting to rush us for his money.”

“Could be. By the way, the newspaper started this morning. Once again we can read the usual gory news. War talk or drug-related shootings. Glad we’re out from the city center a bit.”

“If they put good news on the front page, what would happen?” She took a sip of her coffee.

“People would buy fewer papers. I think people want to know about gruesome things happening to others so they can be thankful for own luck”

“Maybe, but people are more like monkeys than most know. The little monkey watches any big monkey beating up another one so he’ll know which ones are dangerous. We’re attracted to tragic news, even if we don’t like it. Has survival value, I suppose—What’s that article there?”

Hal found were she pointed. “Homeless man found dead on Roush Street. Hey, isn’t that near here? Says he appeared to die of combined exposure and

wounds previously inflicted. Blood and DNA samples are being taken. Further information is not available at this time."

"When they have an update, it'll probably be way back in the paper. Seldom see the end of stories the paper starts." She looked at the clock. "You'd better get going or you'll be caught in heavy traffic."

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Julie had a lot to do before her teaching job started. Nights before, they determined what work was needed they couldn't do. She had to make phone calls over the next few days and get contractors to come by and give quotes. Feeling confined waiting on return calls, she read decorating books and tried to imagine what the old place could look like. It helped, but there were still a few idle moments.

Looking in the bedroom's full-length mirror, she assessed her figure. *Still nice. Hal likes my curves*. Her blonde hair was naturally wavy. Back in her teens she dyed it red but found the thrill temporary. Hal liked it the way it was now. Once she put on a black wig and painted her lips with bright red lipstick. With a dark, tight dress she felt like an adventurous vamp. Hal laughed and took her in an amorous embrace. It was good that her man could sync with her moods. *I'm still an attractive woman, despite*…The biblical word *barren* intruded. A heart-sinking feeling turned her mood gray. "Stop it," she said to her reflection. "You've already been through that. Count the blessings."

*

"I had two return calls and one contractor visit today," Julie said as she pushed her dinner plate away. "The contractor left a quote for sanding the wooden floor. It's on the kitchen counter. Other phone calls were agreeing on times I could be here to talk with carpenters about the damaged fascia and shutters."

"That's progress," Hal said. "I'll look at the quote when the dishes are

done."

After washing dishes by hand, Hal asked if delivery on a dishwasher could be next on Julie's agenda. He then looked over the quote and estimates and told her they seemed reasonable. Together they retired to the living room and watched one program and the news on their old TV.

"Time to retire," Hal said. "No more tragic news until the morning when the paper comes."

"It's too much to hope it will improve because of our new location. Remember the awful news before we moved here about that foster family that was attacked by someone? The adults were killed by slashing and one of the children kidnapped."

"I remember," he said. "Horrible. The other children witnessed the whole thing. Police said a single assailant came at night. I sometimes wonder if possession by demons is for real. The manic mindset that leads to senseless killing is…Enough of this, it's time to call it a day. I'll close up."

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Hal was a sound sleeper. He fell into a deep rhythmic breathing pattern, but not Julie. For some reason she could not sleep and lay awake staring into the dark. Her thoughts ran over the list of things to do and her future job. She also visualized the house again as it could be, seeing herself greeting visitors at the door while Hal put logs in the fireplace. Her thoughts cut off. *What's that?*

A muffled thud somewhere above. She held her breath, straining to hear. *An old house will have creaks and pops.* She raised her head off the pillow and realized a thud is not a pop. The weather report did not forecast rain so thunder could not explain it. They were not near a military base or mining area. She thought about waking Hal but, not hearing anything further, she dismissed the idea.

Bump. Again she heard the sound and sat up in bed.

"Hal, wake up. Wake up." She shook his shoulder. "There's a thudding noise somewhere in the house."

Slowly he rolled over. "Huh? What thud? I didn't hear…"

"It's a low sound, like a bump over us somewhere. Happened twice."

"Might be…Might be sonic boom. Can't hear the Jet. It's too far."

She considered this for a moment, feeling more at ease with his lack of concern. *True, it doesn't sound urgent, like a door or window breaking*. She lay back down and, hearing nothing further, eventually went to sleep.

*

The next morning, after Hal drove off, Julie walked around the house. The limb on a tree near the house reached toward it, but only small branches extended over the roof. And the limb was nowhere near the dormer with cracked glass. Attic access from the tree was extremely unlikely.

Two days later, workmen came and sanded the floor. Soon it would be stained and varnished. Julie also received quotes on the repair of house fascia and shutters. Every day she kept busy after Hal left and was delighted when he returned. At night she continued to hear occasional soft bumping, but ceased to be concerned. Hal helped with routine house rehab chores as much as possible, but his job did involve some travel.

"Starting tomorrow I'll be away three days," Hal said. "They want me at the kiosk in a Health Products Exposition in San Diego. I'll pack tonight and leave you the agenda."

Julie felt a mild flush of anxiety. "Can someone else go in your place?"

"Our CEO feels I can get engineers in the buying companies on our side so they can influence their management."

"You're good at persuasion. But call me every night. I'll get a list of emergency numbers handy just to be safe." She remembered their agreement about

safety. *A weapon in the house could be turned against you.* Most break-ins were for money or valuables. Better for her to grab a cell phone, dial 9-1-1, and hide or maybe run outside than face the danger. But this was the best policy *most* of the time, not always. Life was still a risk.

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The next afternoon, Hal went directly to the airport and did not come home. Julie intended to stay serene but being a stranger in the sparsely populated neighborhood made her a little uneasy.

That night she crawled into bed and shut off the lamp on the nightstand. Some moonlight filtered through the sheer curtains over the window but only allowed her to see dim shapes in the room. *Need to buy some nightlights*. She closed her eyes but found sleep slow in coming.

Bump, the soft sound came from above. She had grown used to it. But with her being alone in the night, it was disquieting. She tried to ignore it as before and covered her head with the blanket.

Thud, *bump* then a tumbling sound. She sprang upward, threw the covers aside and slapped her feet on the floor. Switching on the lamp, she glanced at her cell phone and the emergency list, finding it to be unconsoling. *I could be attacked before anyone could get here*.

The sounds started again, this time indicating motion. She tried to imagine a dog or a person making those sounds, but something was wrong with that. There was also a shuffling, scraping quality. She could only imagine some hideous configuration moving up there. Her grandmother's house had rats. It wasn't that kind of noise.

The sound was closer now, atop the stairs and descending. Her skin crawled and she felt fear paralysis taking hold even as her heart raced. *Fight it. Don't sit like a target.* The effort spurred her to remember a hand-me-down pistol in the

bottom chest drawer underneath her things. Hal didn't know about this when they discussed safety and even she had forgotten about it. She hurried to the chest, jerked the drawer open and uncovered the 22 caliber weapon. It had a loaded clip and only needed the safety off to fire. Taking the gun out, she switched off the lamp and sat on the bed in darkness. *No way I'm going after it, but if it comes in here…*

Julie listened as the thing came down the stairs and turned toward the dining-kitchen area, as if searching. After a pause she heard it coming back. *Please don't come in here*. She could not imagine how large or what shape it would have. Where would she aim in the dark?

The entity reached the stairs and began an uneven ascent. She heard every scrape and thump while her mind traced its path. She was almost certain it had gone into the attic, somehow getting past the partly blocked door.

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Morning came but the mystery remained: What was the thing in the attic? After breakfast Julie heard a knock on the door. It was one of the workmen scheduled for repair on the exterior.

"I'm Joe. Just wanted you to know I was out here for a look-see about the outside jobs we quoted on. I need to plan work details now. Got to get on with it because it's looking like it might rain."

"I see," she said. "No problem. Go ahead and—" An opportunity crossed her mind. "Say, would you come with me to our attic? Something is moving around up there and I just want someone nearby while I investigate."

"Think you have rats or coons?"

She did not comment further, being concerned that he would think her crazy. At the foot of the stairs, she had him wait while she retrieved a flashlight and the gun, which she tucked into the pocket of her loose-fitting jeans so he could not see

it. She led him up the stairs and approached the attic door. “Something’s blocking the door. My husband could only open it part way, but I think I can squeeze by. Please stand near the door and force it open if I call.”

He knitted his brows as if puzzled while she struggled past the door. “Okay, I’m here.”

The flashlight was not as illuminating as she had hoped. Holding the gun in her free hand, she waved the small circle of light around and saw wooden crates, decaying cardboard boxes, trunks, a mounted full-length mirror, and furniture covered with sheets. She could see the light coming through the slightly opened door was growing dim. *Heavy cloud cover*.

Then she saw the bones. Some small animals had been fed upon in here. Moving farther into the recesses Julie noticed her flashlight dimming. *Got to hurry*. A sound came from the dark area farther into the corner. She froze. “Joe, are you out there?” she called back to the workman. There was no response. “Tell me, are you out there?” Still nothing. She remembered Hal saying he wondered if possession by demons were real. Could something driven to madness be in the same dark room with her?

A loud noise came from something scrambling and tumbling in the dark. Panicking, she turned to get out but stumbled and fell, dropping her flashlight and gun. Reaching out to find a solid object, her hand touched something hairy. Raising her head in the dim light her eyes met with something that uttered an ear-piercing screech.

It took seconds to register. The shrieking was both hers and what she encountered. In the dim light, the face of a child, as frightened as she was, peered back at her.

“Don’t hit me, please,” the child pleaded. “I won’t take any more. I promise.”

Julie rose to her knees and retrieved the flashlight. “You scared me. I’m not going to hurt you. Who are you? How did you get here?”

“Are you okay in there?” Joe asked. “Sorry I had to go. Boss drove up outside and I had to leave for a minute.”

“Okay,” she said. “Found the varmint. He’s cute as a button, despite ragged clothes and—” She noticed one foot was deformed. “Go see about your work, Joe. I’m all right.”

*

She led the child out into the short hallway, understanding why sounds of his motion were so irregular. His movements were stumbling and halting, favoring one foot and sometimes crawling. They moved to the stairs and sat on the top step, side by side.

“I’m Julie,” she said. “What’s your name? How long have you been in that attic?”

“William Brennan. My daddy moved us here after he took me from…I think they’re called fosters.”

“How old are you?”

“Five—or six. I don’t know.”

“Where is your daddy? Where does he work?” Sensing the likely answer, she felt her heart soften for the child’s predicament.

“I don’t know. He’s been gone for days. And I don’t know if he works.”

“So you and your dad have been living in this house while it was empty. Was he bringing you food from the outside?”

“Yes, and when he didn’t come back, I sneaked around to find something to eat. The men who came here left some of their lunch. Your kitchen had some.”

Tears wet Julie’s eyes. “Do you want to go back to the people who your dad took you from?

His face puckered with concern. “No, please. They’re mean when the welfare people are not there.”

“You mean Child Welfare Services?”

He nodded. “When my daddy came for me, the foster people called him a bum and cussed at him. They took a baseball bat and knife to him and he had to fight.”

“Did your dad hurt them back?”

“I don’t know. I ran outside when they started to fight.”

She now feared his foster parents were the ones the newspaper said were killed and he was the child kidnapped. By his own father. Maybe the father fell on bad times and could not provide the support Child Welfare Services demanded. But on learning of abuse, the fallen father tried to get the foster couple to give him up anyway.

“I wish my daddy would come back.”

Realizing the body of the homeless man found on Roush Street was almost certainly his father, Julie knew he would have to be told his father wasn’t coming back. She also knew she would need to contact police and Child Welfare, but that could wait. “What say, William, if we wash those ragged clothes, get a bath, and have a nice meal?”

*

Two days later Hal returned and immediately took a liking to William. He looked at his foot and told Julie he knew an orthopedic surgeon that could likely solve his mobility issues.

It was not simple dealing with police and Child Welfare, but eventually Hal and Julie adopted William. After several operations and temporary orthopedic supports, he was able to run and walk with almost no limp. He was bright and in middle school when his adopted parents announced that he might have a sibling.

Against all medical odds, Julie delivered twins. The proud parents named them Joan and Jeffrey. William felt protective and doted on them almost as much as the parents.

Of course, things became crowded. Before the twins, Hal and Julie had rehabbed and updated the old house. But the attic was still the same. Now the family needed more space for new things; twins, cribs, rocking chair, changing table, and more. So they cleared the attic out, installed air conditioning ducts, insulated walls, put up sheet rock, and painted. Then they moved in those new attic things that turned their house into a family home.

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