

Old Things Burn Away

Blake Haney

The smell hit my nostrils before I had even opened my eyes to take in the fresh morning. I could already tell it was a hot Sunday as sweat seeped into my eyes as I rolled out of our bed. It was not on its side, and I did not recall it ever making it there the night before. I walked out of the bedroom, but the smell weakened. The floorboards creaked as I searched the house for the source of the smell. I caught a glimpse of orange out of the kitchen window, which framed the beauty of our backyard. When I looked out, it was standing with its back to me, facing destruction. I knew it had done it. The ghost had finally burned the honeysuckle bushes.

I knew it heard me walk up behind, but it did not move. It was wearing my wife's favorite pajama pants, and tank top which showed pale skin. I was so close to the fire, the heat sent waves against my face.

"I couldn't sleep," it said. I pushed my body into it as I wrapped my arms around its waist. Nothingness. "I sat on the porch most of the night. The smell. I couldn't stand it anymore. I am the only person in the world who does not like the smell of honeysuckles." *Person.*

The bushes were there long before we moved in the house, long before the ghost had taken her place. It sat on a small piece of land near the edge of the Soddy Daisy city limits. I stole her away from the city to live on old family property my grandfather had willed to me. My sister and I played in the field when we were much younger, but it would be many years before I would see or smell those bushes again.

"I'm sure someone else out there hates them. Did you have to burn them down? We could have pulled them up. Together," I whispered.

The fire raged as the sweet smell died.

After the fire went to ashes, I led it back into the house. My steps up the front porch screamed in comparison to the silence of its presence. It fell into her old spot in the couch, which didn't smell like her anymore. "Do you want me to make you anything to eat?" I said. I knew what it would say before the question had even left my mouth. Ghosts don't eat.

"I'm not too hungry. Maybe something in a little while." It said that every time I asked.

The eyes were heavy. I wanted to rock it to sleep, just so it could find peace and cross over. How does one become husband to a ghost? To something not really there? I could not truly hold it, touch it, kiss it, or sense it the way I used to. I had fallen away.

"I'm going to the bedroom," it whispered.

"To sleep?"

"Maybe." It walked up the stairs and I heard the hinges of the door squeal.

I looked down at the floor where I was standing only to see the brown spot that would not go away. It had been two weeks, and all the scrubbing power in the world would not help. It was hard to get the image of the blood out of my head. The brown replacement seemed better than the red. Nothing could replace the image of her staring at her stomach, then the floor. I still can't determine which she was truly looking at. It would take a steam cleaner for the stain. I did

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not even know if Soddy Daisy had someone to steam clean a carpet. Better to wait, in case it was sleeping. I pulled the carpet cleaner from under the sink, and tried again.

Later that day, I stood at our door. The crying had stopped a few days before, and silence filled the space. There was not much for me to do. I cleaned places I had already cleaned the day before. I kept the papers in case she ever came back and decided to start reading them again. I moved from the door, deciding to keep my hopes up that the ghost would go away.

The door to the room beside ours had been closed since the day of the carpet stain. Dust had likely settled, and her allergies would act up if it was not taken care of. I opened the door with a breath. Light came through the curtainless window; she didn't want to jump the gun on a color for them. The walls were yellow, neutral. My cradle was whitewashed, and in the far corner of the room. She adored it more than anything else in the room. "It has your history," she once said. It took me a moment to register that I was crying, for the first time since the stain.

Men are strong. We are resilient. We are expected to do all and be all, mostly because we tell ourselves we have to be. Helpless is never one of the things we wish to be, but sometimes, it is inevitable. We look at the ones we love struggling to put a life back together, and many times, we can do nothing with the tools we think we have. Old things burn away sometimes, making way for the new. The honeysuckles came back the next summer, and the ghost is a memory she doesn't talk about. I don't ask.