

Our Beautiful Fireplace

by

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It was the fireplace that sold the house to me, in the end, and please believe me when I tell you: it was beautiful.

Terry and I first visited the place a couple days after the old family had moved out, leaving behind them uncarpeted floors and bare walls with little hard flecks of nose-picked snot smeared into the wallpaper in the kids' bedrooms, and, honestly, it didn't look like much to me. Not from the outside; not from the inside. And the location, triangulated down to the dead-end outskirts of a one-street town — purely because it was equidistant from my shop, Terry's office and Hannah's school and so neither of us would be any less inconvenienced than the other — wasn't going to sell the house to any of us.

But the *fireplace*. I mean: *God*.

I remember: we'd been led by the alarmingly pregnant estate agent out of the poky kitchen, under a cracked lintel that someone had painted a horrid banana-peel yellow and into the lounge, and I was about ready to say: Terry, that's it, I don't want to live here, not ever, now can we please go home and start looking somewhere else? I was about to say those exact words — I remember, quite distinctly, the tip of my tongue poised against my top teeth like a trigger finger — and then I saw the fireplace.

It was gorgeous. A solid marble slab for a hearthstone, raised up from the knotted

floorboards in a plinth that led your eyes helplessly towards the fireplace's intricate mouth, which was itself a curled, curved, baroque opening that seemed less like a hole into the wallspace than a promise of, oh, escape and comfort and everything you could want from a *home*, not a house but a *home*, and when I saw it, saw those leaves and branches wrought in black iron, climbing up the sides to meet in an arch that seemed to both dangle from and support the mantel — marble, too, of course — God, I just knew I wanted it.

All the rest of the place: the cramped kitchen, the dirty bedroom walls and floors — all of it seemed like a challenge to overcome so we could live in this dream-house, this dream-home, with the perfect fireplace at the heart of it all.

"I want it," I told Terry, and he looked back at me and his eyes shone like he'd seen it too; shone like they hadn't since such a long time, and he said, "It's yours, Chlo." And I corrected him and I said, "No, T. No. It's ours."

And that's when I knew. We were going to start again, start everything again, beginning from the fireplace. From there we'd make this house into our perfect home.

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Terry fixed up the ceiling light first, so that we could work late into the autumn nights. We wanted that fire roaring and cosy by the time December rolled around. We wanted Hannah to see in Christmas Day with her fluffy, stuffed-full stocking dangling from those metalworked vines and thorns. I started by pulling the ugly wallpaper down from the living room walls. Its peeling corners suggested that the last owners had started to remove it before they left; until, I supposed, finding it too difficult a task, and leaving the job unfinished.

Terry drove back from the DIY store three or four times a day, with a car boot packed tight with cans of apple-green matte emulsion, Swedish chairs and tables, meadow-soft carpet ready to be laid. I helped him unpack the shopping and then fill the car back up with thick, curled licks of cream-coloured wallpaper that smelled of damp and old glue, for him to drop off at the tip on his way back to the shop.

He was on one of those trips when I first heard it; a whistling, hissing sound just on the edge of my hearing. Like someone drawing in a neverending breath. I couldn't find its source, not right away. I looked and listened carefully, squinting against the sun as it poured in through the window.

When Terry staggered back in with the last of the paint, I held a finger to my lips, then his: "Shhh," I said. He stooped and put the bags of sloshing cans down.

"What is it, Chlo?"

"Shhh."

When he frowned, his whole face squooshed up like an old car in one of those big magnetic crushers. His features all raced to meet in the centre. He wasn't attractive, not anymore, I knew that. He had been handsome, once, but a decade of late nights and early starts had taken its toll, and then Hannah came along, and God knows we hadn't been good for each other since then.

"Listen," I said to him, "do you hear it?"

"I do," he said. "What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you look to see where it was coming from?"

He could be so dense sometimes. So slow. "Well of course I did," I snapped. It wasn't that I

was angry. But his train of thought could move just so unimaginably *sluggishly* sometimes, and even then, I wouldn't have minded, I honestly wouldn't, if it wasn't for the fact he'd come out of that aimless swampy mess of a mental process every time with a bullheaded certainty that he must have been the first one to think of whatever it was he'd thought of.

Of course I looked. I mean, *God*.

I stomped into the kitchen to fix myself some tea, staring angrily through the window above the sink at the garden and the cloudy skies bearing down overhead.

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When I came back with the tea, Terry was squatting in front of the fireplace, rocking on his feet to keep his balance as he ran his grubby hands up and down the smooth twists and twirls of flora and fauna that some craftsman had worked diligently into the iron arch, decades earlier.

"Terry, you'll dirty it!" I told him. But he just grunted and kept feeling his way up the sides, like he was feeling for something just underneath the decoration. I could even see the shiny stains that his car-greased fingers were leaving on the arch's nested twigs and open-beaked birds. "Terry! You're *dirtying* it!"

"It's coming from here," he said, when his big hands finally met in the middle. "Can you hear it?" But he didn't look at me when he spoke.

I had to admit, he was right: it was coming from the fireplace. But when I realised that, and listened closer, the noise seemed much more soothing than before. It was like listening to a seashell: a soft tide that washed through the room and cleansed your mind of distractions. Terry bent over, thrusting his whole head into the hearth's ornate mouth so his too-small shirt rode up his back and left a semicircle of dark, mole-ridden dorsal skin on display between the hem and the top of his awful old-man jeans. I shut my eyes and listened to the noise emanating from the hearth: a miasma of calm, of tranquillity.

When I opened them again Terry was still there: on his hands and knees now, still feeling under the arch, like you might to pop a car's bonnet, grunting now and again, as if to signal to me and anyone else watching that he knew what he was doing, which of course I knew meant that he didn't.

It was time to pick Hannah up from Nursery, anyway, so I left him to it.

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Hannah was standing crossly at the dull grey steel gates of the playground, the last one to be collected, with her teacher's hands resting on her shoulders.

"I'm sorry. I was held up," I explained, smiling my best customer-service smile.

"Mummy you're late," Hannah stated. She climbed onto the front seat and we pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Nanna," I replied. "Mummy and Daddy were working in the living room, and time got away from us."

She thought about that and then asked: "Is my bedroom ready?"

"Not yet, Nanna," I said. "We want the living room to be perfect."

"Oh," she said.

I bought her a Barbie on the way home, by way of apology. She clutched its oblong pink box to her chest while we drove the rest of the way back, in silence. Arriving in the driveway, I saw the lounge window ajar. Perhaps Terry had started painting, I thought. I left Hannah in the car as I walked up to the window. I peeked inside to see what my husband had done.

At first I didn't see him: my eye was caught by the fireplace, dominating the wall across from

the window. Then I looked further in, pressing my face up to the cold glass pane, and I saw him, sitting on the floor, his back resting against the corner where the glue-stained wall to the left joined with this one. His mouth was hanging open and his hands rested on his cross-legged knees. He was staring at the fireplace, not blinking.

"Nanna, honey," I said to my daughter, while my muscles tensed and my blood vessels dilated, "Nanna, go inside and run up to your room."

I helped her out of the car and she launched herself through the front door, into the hall and up the stairs on all fours. I stormed into the living room to tell Terry exactly what I thought of his just sitting there like an imbecile while I had to run about keeping everything running. But when I exited the kitchen into the lounge he was back on his hands and knees by the fireside. He had a leather case of tools open on the marble hearthstone beside him; the one his uncle had left him.

"Terry, you haven't done *anything*," I said. The walls were still unpainted, the furniture still boxed up and unbuilt, and that noise was still hissing from the fireplace. Terry's shadow stretched directly into its mouth, thrown stark against the wall by the setting sun. The window was shut, now, I noticed.

"Shh," he said. "I've nearly found it." He tapped on the inside of the hearth with something heavy and metal, with a casual force that made me wince.

"You'll damage it, T!"

"Shhh."

The hissing sound coming out of the opening *was* soothing, but it had an aggressive quality to it. It refused to stay in the background, shouldering its way to the front of your awareness.

"Well, hurry up," I said. "I want to finish painting the walls soon. Hannah needs a real bedroom."

Terry *hmm-hmmed* and continued tapping the inside of the fireplace. I looked nervously at its arch while he bashed about carelessly inside. Tendrils of exotic plants curled around the grinning faces of birds and primates who looked out into the room through black, glossy eyes. It looked sturdy enough, I told myself.

"I'll put the dinner on," I sighed. Terry didn't reply. I had to duck under the rotten-looking doorframe to get through into the kitchen, which I didn't remember doing before. In the kitchen the noise melted away, leaving me free to get on with the cooking, but it also left the room feeling cold and harsh, like a morgue. I glanced back into the living room occasionally as I prepared our food, like I was stealing glimpses at a new lover.

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The next morning I returned from the school run and found Terry back in the fireplace. He was sitting on the marble plinth, his back to the wall, with his legs spread out in front of him. He was looking up into the chimney's flue, leaning so far back into the fire that his whole head was obscured by the ornamented arch.

It was as if he hadn't moved; as if he'd stayed downstairs all night. But I was certain I remembered him joining me upstairs, settling down to sleep on the camp bed we'd set up in our empty bedroom. I was certain.

Both of his hands were reaching up to touch something hidden from sight.

"Haven't you got work today, T?" I asked.

I fixed him up a cup of tea and set it down beside him on the milk-coloured hearthstone.

Next to the fireplace, the hissing sound was even louder than before. It wrapped you up inside it, warm and welcoming. It sounded like barely-audible whispers. Like comforting, night-time, wordless voices.

"I'm going to paint the walls today," I announced.

I took a stepladder from the piled stacks of household stuff that Terry'd brought home from the store the day before, and set it up against the front wall, by the window. I started to paint. The sun had stopped shining, now: from my perch just above the curtain rail, the light from outside seemed to swirl and flicker darkly, beating against the glass.

At lunchtime I took away Terry's untouched tea. He still had his head tucked out of sight, behind the overhang in the fireplace. The whispering from the hearth hadn't changed its tone or volume all day.

"What are you doing in there, Terry?" I asked. "Did you work out what's making the noise?"

He fiddled with something that creaked mournfully in reply.

"Careful in there, Terry."

Anthropomorphic rats and mice smiled at me from the iron hedgerow that framed the fireplace and Terry's seated body. He stayed where he was.

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I'd painted a half-metre high strip of soothing green above the window when Terry finally pulled himself out of the fireplace.

"Listen," he said, to the room. He smiled with a quiet smugness, the way he used to look whenever he worked out that his monthly spend was under-budget. "Listen."

I watched him from my vantage point on the stepladder as he slid his hands back under the overhanging top lip of the hearth.

The whispering from the fireplace stopped abruptly. The room seemed deafening. I could hear the horns and engines of cars half a mile down the road. Shouts and cries from people and their pets. I leapt the three steps down to the ground. "What did you do? What did you do?" I asked, over and over. Terry was laughing: giggling, really; gurgling happily with all the charmless delight of a toddler. "Bring it back," I ordered him.

The sound returned, brought me down from my state of anxiety. I felt my pulse gradually slowing to normal, as the soothing whisper of the fireplace lowered me back into calm and comfort.

"Terry," I scolded him. "You scared me."

"Look," he said.

I got down onto my hands and knees beside him and tilted my head to look under the mantel where he was gesturing.

"Do you see?" Terry asked.

"What is it?"

"Look."

He slid his hands up and under the overhang. Up close, the designs in the black arch caught the light coming through the window. They seemed to writhe about in front of me. Animals contorted and cavorted in their nests and dens, pulling at my vision. It was everything I could do to keep focused on my husband's hands.

When they reached a point about midway up the left-hand side, they stopped. The hearth's voice stopped with them, again, suddenly. As my breathing quickened again he pulled both

hands back out, raising them like a hostage negotiator. "Easy," he said, as the fireplace began to whisper once more. "It's a pipe, see?"

I looked closer. My eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the fireplace. And I saw: yes, a circular opening, a hole of a deeper black than the soot-coated metal around it, no wider across than Hannah's head.

A gentle sucking sound was coming softly from the opening.

"Can I...?"

I stretched my own hand out towards it. I felt the movement of air. The hole was ever so slightly — but steadily, inexorably — drawing in the air around it. Like the world's weakest vacuum cleaner: the suction had no more force than a hastily gasped breath. Terry had been sliding his hand across it, blocking off its access. That's how he'd stopped the noise.

My own hand was smaller than his; too small to cover it up. If I pointed my fingers together, like a cone, I might even be able to fit it inside: up to my wrist, or further, even.

"Where does it go?" I asked. My heart fluttered as I stared at the hole, trying to see inside. But before Terry could answer, a sound from outside pulled us both back to reality. Tyres crunching on gravel and the ratchet-grind of a handbrake.

"Who..." I said, out loud.

I got up to look out of the window onto the driveway. It was empty. Nothing but happily warm sunshine was visible.

A sharp knocking on the front door broke through the fireplace's susurrating whisper, stabbing at my ears. I went to answer it. Standing on the doorstep was Ellie Carter, Hannah's nursery teacher. Her head was framed sternly against the overcast sky above the trees. She was holding Hannah by the hand.

"You didn't pick her up," said Ellie.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's half past four. Hannah was waiting for an hour."

"Half past four," I echoed. Time had sped by.

"You're lucky that Hannah knew the name of the street. We were calling you for forty minutes. Where were you?" Her frown looked unusually genuine, and angry, too.

"We were here the whole time. I didn't hear the phone." Then I realised. "Maybe the phone company didn't connect us yet," I explained. "We've just moved, you see."

"What about your mobile? Or Terry's? Is he here? What were you doing? How could you forget your own daughter?"

"I'm sorry," I said, but I was tired of the conversation. Tired of being lectured. I wanted to go back to the living room; back to my fireside. "We've just moved," I added.

Ellie tutted all the way back to her car. I shrugged and led Hannah into the house.

"Why did you forget me, Mummy?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Nanna," I said, in the hall. "We've just moved, you see."

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I sent Hannah up to her room. I asked her to think about what she wanted her room to look like. I went back to the living room. The sunset through the window was gorgeous, I thought to myself.

"That was Ellie," I remarked. "She brought Hannah home from Nursery."

Terry was lying down on his side by the fire, looking up at the mysterious opening inside.

The hearth's pleasant whistling sounded almost melodic, now, filling my head and my heart with a relaxed warmth, gently untangling the frustration and indignation I was feeling at Ellie Carter's unsolicited intrusion into our private affairs.

Who the hell does she think she is anyway, I started to think, picking the paint roller back up; but before I'd even finished the thought I realised it didn't matter. It was over now. I held the roller, dripping green emulsion onto the floor, while we listened to the hearth's song.

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The next morning, Terry and I both woke at the same time, for once. We smiled at each other as we got up from our camp bed and made our way downstairs. We didn't even get dressed: there wasn't any need. The sunrise beamed through the window and tinted everything a rosy, tingling pink.

"I should try lighting the fire," Terry announced, and he went to find matches.

I sat down on the marble plinth and let the hearth sing to me while I waited.

Terry returned, at some point, and knelt over the grate next to me. He was smiling. He held a match into the fireplace and lit it, but it extinguished immediately.

"We need kindling," he said.

I heard a sound behind us and turned to see Hannah standing in the doorway, still wearing her pyjamas.

"Mummy and Daddy," she said. "I have to go to nursery."

"Not today, Nanna," I smiled, pointing at the fireplace. "Look."

Hannah waddled in and took a seat on the bottom step of the ladder I'd been using to paint the walls.

First we burnt all the paper, card and wood left over from the last few days' shopping. Then all our books, and the boxes they'd been stored in. Next we fed the hearth the furniture we'd brought with us from the old house. Hannah's bare feet swung back and forth as she watched Terry place wooden brackets and dowels and handles into the fireplace. It all burnt, all burst into bright red sparks as we watched, but the flames never lasted more than a minute or so before they consumed the fuel and the fireplace's sucking mouth deprived them of the air they needed to stay alight.

"We need more kindling," said Terry.

I went upstairs and looked through our bedroom, but it was empty by then. I wandered out onto the landing and into Hannah's room. The temporary bed we'd set up for her while we finished the move was still made, unslept-in. On the floor beside it was a piece of paper. I picked it up. She had scrawled a child's approximation of the bedroom onto it, a top-down view of the room drawn in shaky coloured crayon. Each corner of the room was labelled: Bed, Toys, Hapy, Sad.

I looked up and examined the areas she'd marked out. In the corner labelled "Bed" was a quarter-circle heap of clothes and cushions that had been fashioned into a kind of nest. "Toys", sure enough, held a pile of the plastic garbage she'd brought with her from the old house. A stack of family photos and some drawings she'd made in her Nursery class was in the "Happy" corner. The final corner of the room, the one marked as "Sad" on her floor plan, was much emptier than the other three, which made me feel pleased. I walked over to it and bent down to look. On the floor was a solitary object: it was the Barbie I'd bought her to apologise for being late, the other day.

I felt something dull and faraway in my chest. I stooped to pick up the doll. It was still in its cardboard box. That would burn nicely. I picked up the photos and drawings, too. On top of all of these I placed the diagram she'd drawn of her bedroom and I brought them all downstairs for Terry to burn.

I had to bend almost double to get from the kitchen into the living room. When I straightened up, smoothing my hair with one free hand, I noticed that Terry wasn't there anymore. The hearth's song seemed louder; happier. Hannah sat watching the fireplace, still smiling.

I walked over to the fire and knelt on the marble, bowing my head for a moment. The box of matches was still lying by the grate, but it was empty. I listened to the sound of the gentle voice that filled the room. I touched the warm metal arch; slid my hands along the lattice of iron-wrought limbs and veins and muscle that stretched and hummed in a beautiful, twisting curve over the singing mouth of the fireplace. Its music wrapped me in an embrace like a nurturing womb. I lifted the pile of Hannah's things onto the fireplate inside, placing them under the howling opening that led to the source of the voice. The papers rustled and flapped before being sucked up into the open pipe, one by one, until they were all gone. But it still wasn't enough.

I beckoned Hannah over, held out my hand as she neared. She took it, and her own palm felt small and soft in mine. The air was almost electric.

When it was done, I went back to the wall. The midday sun warmed the back of my neck through the window. The two blank walls on either side of me remained unpainted and unadorned. I sat, then, watching and listening to my beautiful fireplace.