

Under the Stairs at Ridge Way

My father, an armchair physicist who worked in construction, used to say that ‘nature abhors a vacuum’. This is true. If there’s an empty space under a deck, shed or dock, nature will fill it with mold, bees, birds or anything else that the world feels needs to go there. And under the stairs in the house at the end of Ridge Way, there was an empty space. And there was something there.

When we first moved in, we didn’t notice it. Socks would go missing or my wife, Beth, would lose bobby pins. I chalked this up as the regular magic of moving into a new house. Things turned up, but not how we expected. Sometimes they reappeared in beds, sometimes in the sink. I once found one of Beth’s bobby pins in a bite of a sandwich.

“It’s just them havin’ some fun, Charlie,” A neighbor had explained to us. He owned the green acres next to us and had a face like one of the goats that he kept. When the old farmer had come over to see how we were doing, I joked that the Scotland air seemed to keep taking our things. “The brownies like to be a bit playful. It’s best ya ignore them and let them go about their business as ya go about yours.”

As a history professor, I had heard of brownies in certain folklore and legends. Leprechauns, sprites, and other such fairytale company were often seen in the presence of these little housekeepers. Generally speaking, they were benevolent, if a little troublesome, spirits that helped keep the home in order. Most of their pranks were harmless and persuaded to behave with ‘treats’ left out in the open. I didn’t think anything of it until the noises began.

It was a skittering that seemed to travel through the walls. At first, we decided that the old house was settling, but the more we heard, the stranger it seemed. I would be grading papers in

my office at home and hear a scratching at the door, but when I opened it, the cat wouldn't be anywhere nearby. Even when I left the door open, I was annoyed by the sounds of ghost scratching in the walls. Beth swore she heard it coming from the back of her closet once and dove head first, desperate to try and find the source of the noise. The cat would bolt from one room to another in pursuit of our invisible tormentors.

Beth thought it was mice. We called an exterminator and he checked for anything suspicious. No mice in the walls, no birds in the attic, not even an ant in the mudroom. When he gave the report he was almost disappointed but was more than happy to come back any time Beth called. The results remained the same: no pests, no spraying, and no end to the skittering in our walls.

It always culminated at the stairs. We'd hear them underneath and nearly felt as if they were always underfoot. I had made several expeditions into the crawlspace, but nothing turned up. The minute I would be in the staircase, any skittering ceased. I spent an hour under the stairs one afternoon, hoping to catch a rat that had snuck past our exterminator's gaze.

"Have ya been feedin' em?" Our neighbor asked, scratching the border collie that never left his side. "If they're hungry, they'll probably cause ya more trouble. Think ya aren't holding up yer end of the deal."

"Milk and bread?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Aye...and a bit of honey to get on their good side, for sure. I'd bet you're not in their good graces at the moment. But, start to feed 'em and they'll do their end of the job."

It was silly, of course, but I left out a little bread and milk. Since the exterminator confirmed we had no pests, I didn't think one night with food on the floor would hurt anything. By morning, it was gone and I assumed the cat had eaten it on one of her nightly excursions. The house was

silent that day as I worked through my book proposal for an editor in Edinburgh. Later that night, Beth found all our missing socks in a pile in the closet. I suggested it was the cat, but she noticed that several of the holes in her running socks were somehow repaired. I left out bread and milk again.

The house finally settled. Beth joked that my night time ritual was absurd, but I told her it was a habit now. My ‘homely magic’—as Beth called it—made sure that our house was quiet at night, the cat was calm and our things never went missing again. Clothing seemed to repair itself, a loose knob on the cabinet tightened overnight and we never had even a fly invade our humble abode.

One night I woke from a deep sleep by what felt like a bite on my hand. I bolted up in bed and turned on the light, relieved that there wasn’t any blood. I thought it was the cat, but she was sleeping by Beth’s feet. The skittering came back like a cloud of flies hovering by the doorframe. The noise snaked its way down the hallway and I followed, like a mouse enchanted by the Pied Piper. The noise took me down the staircase and into the kitchen.

It was dark, only a shaft of moonlight that seemed to bounce from window to window guided my way. I was jumping at shadows again, but my still sleeping brain had led me down here for a reason. I had to find out what was going on now.

The scratching was coming from the far corner, near the stove. It almost sounded like something was clicking and clattering in the oven. I felt a surge of joy, finally able to solve what had vexed me for months. I presumed the oven had trapped whatever had been making that noise. I ripped open the oven door with a victorious ‘Ah-ha’ and gaped. The oven was empty.

What I did find was a slight ticking sound. It sounded like tiny fingers tapping on the metal somewhere inside the stove. I leaned in a little and the smell hit me in a noxious wave. Gas was seeping out of the oven, giving the air a harsh taste that filled my lungs when I breathed. I stood up, switched off all the burners and ran upstairs. I got Beth and the cat before running and calling the fire department from the front yard. The fire chief met us on our lawn in fifteen minutes and gave us the all clear after five.

“You’re lucky you caught the smell!” The fire chief told us after he took off his face mask. “You managed to shut everything off, but that old stove will need replacing. If you’d slept through it your household would be in a lot worse shape. Be glad the smell woke you.”

I tried to hide it, but I Beth noticed me unconsciously gripping my hand. Once the fire marshal declared our house was no longer a hazard, we opened all the windows and went back in. I didn’t sleep much but left out extra milk and bread with a generous dollop of honey.