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Sister Coulsey's Furnace

Sister Goulsey's Furnace

by

C. R. Wiley

Pastor Ricky had placed all his hopes on the Hawaiian shirt. He wanted to connect with people and he had seen one of those television preachers wearing one. The people at the TV preacher's church were all tanned and good-looking. Some were even drinking coffee during the service. *I need what that guy has*, Ricky thought. That's why he started wearing the shirt.

The old-guard did not like it, but they were uptight and frumpy. *Probably drink instant coffee*, Pastor Ricky mused. He lifted his cup and took a long sniff. Starbucks. He looked over the rim and admired his reflection in the shiny surface.

By his third cup, his wife had shuttled the kids off to school, and he was settling down to a little mid-morning nap. He was on the verge of nodding off when he heard metal scraping against metal.

It was coming from outside, through the window and above the couch he was on. A red and blue form went up a ladder. Then it dawned on him: he had mentioned off-handedly to Elmer Gullet the day before that the parsonage gutters needed cleaning.

He knew he had to do something. There was a seventy-year-old man on top of an aluminum ladder cleaning his gutters. Not just cleaning them—he was cleaning them in

an accusing manner. Each scrape of the gloved hand in the trough, each tinkle and patter-mat of leaves falling to the ground said, "lazy preacher; laaazzy preacher, preacher."

"Why today?" Pastor Ricky asked aloud, knowing perfectly why.

He wanted to cuss. Instead he stumbled to the closet and pulled out his flannel shirt. On his way out the door he poured Elmer some coffee. "Burning coals," he mumbled.

"Hello, Brother Elmer!" The man was old guard; that's the way you address old guard. "You don't need to do that! I was planning to get to it."

A white-haired man leaned back and looked down a long nose flushed red by the November wind. Two unruly white eyebrows arched in mock surprise. "Why Pastor, I didn't expect to find you home! Thought you'd be out visiting the sick or some such thing."

"Not today. I do that on *Tuesdays*." Pastor Ricky paused to see if that produced the desired effect—perhaps understanding, perhaps a word of encouragement—something like, "*Oh, Pastor, I forgot that today is your day off. You work hard, you need a day off, you deserve it.*" Nothing of the kind, just a faint smile resulted, a little

upturn at the corner of the mouth.

"I brought you some coffee. Want some?" Pastor Ricky lifted the steaming cup. The corner of the mouth turned down. A flicker of annoyance flashed in the piercing blue eyes.

"No thanks, Preacher. Had my fill hours ago."

"Well then, let me get a ladder and help."

"That's all right, Preacher. I'll have this job done lickety-split. You just go back to your prayer closet and intercede for the lost."

The man was a sadist.

Just then the phone began to ring.

"Better get that, might be some poor soul in need of counsel."

When he got in he grabbed the phone like it was a life-line thrown to a drowning man.

"Hello, parsonage."

"Oh, Pastor. I'm so glad you're home!"

It was Emma Couelsey, retired nurses' aide with a house falling down around her. He had tried to persuade her to sell and move to elderly housing, but she had raised her children in that house—the ones that never called—and she couldn't bear the thought. So there she sat, surrounded by memories, in a house that loved her no better than her kids did.

"Sister Couelsey, what's the matter?"

"Pastor," she said trying to calm herself, "the furnace is acting up. I'm so sorry to bother you, but it's making knocking sounds, and there's a funny smell, and I don't have any heat."

Pastor Ricky checked the thermometer through the kitchen window, the one next to Elmer's ladder, right next to Elmer's boot. No scraping. No leaves falling. It read 39 degrees.

"Sister Couelsey, how cold is it in your house right now?"

"Oh Pastor, it is cold," she said sounding like she was about to cry. "Let's see. The

thermostat says 52 degrees."

The woman was 78 years old. "Are you wrapped up? Have you got some wool things on?"

"Yes, Pastor. I'm in the kitchen and I've got the oven door open. It helps a little."

He could see it. A white-faced little old lady huddled by her stove sipping tea, with a coat over her night clothes. He could try to get Bob Johnson over there, but he was in the body shop by now and probably couldn't get away. There was Elmer, of course.

"Sister Couelsey, I'll be right over."

"Oh, thank you Pastor."

He hung up the phone. "Of all days, why today, Lord?"

He glanced out the window. The ladder was gone.

No time for a shower. What to wear? It's Sister Couelsey. He groaned—a suit. To fix a furnace? It was what she expected. He grabbed the old black polyester one, a white shirt, and his most conservative tie.

When he clambered downstairs he shot a look out to the garage. The Honda was gone. His wife had taken it. The Toyota was in the shop again. The only thing to do was to take the Buick.

He had inherited it from his namesake—his grandfather, the Reverend Richard Jehu Clay. It was a black 1968 Electra four-door. It had been all over the tri-state area, taking Grandpap to Sunday School rallies and revival meetings. He had kept it like he had kept himself; clean inside and out—he had even wiped the engine down with gasoline once a month. Just before he died he had pressed the keys into Ricky's hand. "Here, son, she should go to a preacher. She's consecrated to the Lord's work. She ain't ever let me down."

When he got outside Elmer was nowhere to be seen.

Were you eavesdropping, you old Pharisee? Pastor Ricky wondered. *It figures you would make yourself scarce just when I*

could have used the help. He didn't really mean that second thought. What he actually felt was relief.

He got into the car and collected himself. The smell of old vinyl took him back. As a boy he had ridden with his grandfather a lot. He used to lie across the back seat, in those benighted days before seatbelt laws, and look up at the leafy branches flying by and the still sun shining through. And he remembered his grandfather singing along with Johnny Cash as he drove. Johnny wore black because Grandpap wore black, that's what he had thought. But in those days every man of God wore black.

The car had rear quarter-panels like wings—a real preacher mobile—made for rolling over the highways and byways on oversized whitewalls, making the rough places smooth. He pulled out, one easy turn of the wheel following another, turning wide to give parked cars plenty of berth, a graceful whale carrying the prophet to Nineveh.

He pulled into the gravel driveway in front of Sister Coulseys's. Then he went to the trunk. There, in the corner of its vast expanse, was his grandfather's tool box. It occurred to him that he'd never looked inside it. He popped it open. Right on top sat a Gideon Bible, and beneath it an array of tools, all neat and arranged by size and function. The man had been a Calvinist, after all. Pastor Ricky wasn't sure what he could do with them; he wasn't very good with his hands. He snapped the lid shut.

When he tried the doorbell the white plastic button fell off and two twisted wires jumped out. He knocked.

"Just a minute," said a muffled voice from within. After enough time to feel the chill through his coat, the door opened part-way. Mittened-hands and an elderly face appeared.

"Oh, Pastor, thank the Lord you're here. Wait." She closed the door and there was some scuffling. When she opened it again

there was just enough room for her to stand back. Behind her stood a stack of boxes and to the side a cupboard lined with figurines, all squirrels.

"Sister Coulseys, it's freezing in here!"

"I know, Pastor. It's a little warmer in the kitchen."

He went to the thermostat, bumping into boxes. It read 45 degrees.

"If we don't get that furnace going today we'll just have to get you someplace warm until we do."

"Oh, I hope you do, Pastor. It would be such trouble moving my cats."

He stepped into the kitchen and was greeted by litter box odor—that along with a sink filled with unwashed dishes, an open oven door, and bits of cat food strewn about. A small space on the kitchen table had been cleared for a tea cup and the morning paper.

There was a door to one side.

"Is that the way to the basement?"

He opened it without waiting for an answer. A wisp of smoke wafted out and the smell of rotten eggs came along with it. He turned on a light. He discerned piles of stuff on the basement floor and realized it was probably more cluttered than the upstairs.

"That's odd," Pastor Ricky remarked. "I could swear that's sulfur I smell."

"Lord, have mercy." Sister Coulseys said sounding like she might start to cry.

"Now, now, let's see what I can do."

Just then there was a clunk and the light in the basement went out.

"There goes the noise again, Pastor! It woke me up in the middle of the night. It scared me out of my wits."

"I wonder what it could be? Do you have a flash light? I left mine at home."

"I think I do." She went to a kitchen drawer and rummaged around, finally producing a little blue one, the kind kids use.

He turned it on and a weak yellowish beam appeared.

Down he went. The stairs were uneven

and shaky and missing a tread at the bottom. The walls were fieldstone and dank. The floor was dirt and uneven. He wondered what the furnace was like.

There it stood, like some prehistoric thing, looking like Medusa's head rising from the sea. A plethora of ducts came from the top—the old round sort—winding to every corner of the house. The face itself was white and ghostly from a thick layer of asbestos that caked it like cold cream. It was swollen too, at least eight times the size of a modern furnace. It was big, inefficient, and hazardous.

"Ew, that's not good," Ricky said under his breath.

"How does it look, Pastor?" the voice of wan hope said from above.

"I'm still looking. I'll let you know what I find. Why don't you keep warm by the stove? As soon as I know something I'll give you a shout."

The door shut and out went the light from the kitchen.

He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Then he cleared some space in front of the leviathan to work. He didn't know much about this sort of thing but the last time his own furnace acted up the repair man showed him a few things. First, he examined the oil tank just in case she'd run out of fuel. There was plenty. He hit the emergency restart switch on the burner. There was a sound of flames. He placed a hand on a duct to feel for heat. After a minute it was still cold. He listened for the blower. He could hear it fine. Just to double check the flame he reached for the fire box door that sat in the middle of Medusa's head like a little mouth.

"Ouch!" A duct had fallen on his head.

He stood back and examined the offending duct. The hanger had come undone somehow.

He opened the tool box. All the ducts shook briefly, showering him with dust. He found a small screw driver and put the loose

duct back in place. Then he returned to the fire box door.

It took some prying (the old iron hinges were rusty) but it opened. The ducts trembled again. With the burner going it seemed to Pastor Ricky that the interior should have been a warm orange-red, but it was pitch black. He aimed the little beam from Sister Coulsey's flashlight inside. What he saw was the outline of something dark and two little points reflecting light back at him. The furnace shuddered.

He went to his grandfather's tool box for something to probe with. It had two levels; the top was a tray for smaller tools. What he needed was something long. He lifted the tray out hoping to find a longer screw driver.

All the ducts began to gyrate and pull against the joists they were attached to—a screeching sound started low and rose in the background.

This should have caught Pastor Ricky's attention. But it didn't. His eyes were riveted upon the contents of the tool box. There, on top of the wildest assortment of implements he'd ever seen, sat a small book with the impossible name: *Strong's Guide to Household Hell Spawn: A Companion to Strong's Concordance*.

Before his mind could comprehend it, and before his hand could clasp it, a duct crashed down on him and sent him sprawling.

A second duct smashed the tool box, sending its contents across the floor.

He looked up and saw that all the ducts had broken loose and were writhing and turning like hair in a hurricane. From the fire box door a face of flame with two burning eyes stared balefully at him. With a clanging of ducts there came a wail of rage. Pastor Ricky noted that the ducts, which until that moment had been nothing more than a chaotic jumble of tubes, were now a coordinated mass about to fly down upon him. Just in time he rolled behind the water

heater. The sound they made upon striking the floor resembled a car wreck.

The door to the kitchen opened and suddenly everything went still.

“Pastor? Is everything all right? What’s that ungodly racket?”

Ricky swallowed and tried to steady his voice. “I think I’ve found the problem. Just go back to your tea and I’ll try to get this all cleared up.”

“Praise the Lord!” she said and shut the door.

Flames roared.

From his position behind the water heater Pastor Ricky managed to see the gilding of *Strong’s Guide*. He dove headlong and grabbed it, rolling away just in time to dodge another blow. Scampering on hands and feet, he took cover behind the stairs.

He still had the flashlight. He flipped frantically through the book. Fortunately it was organized alphabetically. The first chapter was given over to attics, with subsections. Attics: noises, Attics: ghosts, Attics: unnatural drafts, and so forth. Copious illustrations of fantastical creatures and step by step guides to their removal were contained in each subdivision. In the margins he saw notes in his grandfather’s spidery scrawl. He found the basement section. Basements: supernatural flooding, Basements: nocturnal banging. Nothing for furnaces. He turned ahead looking for the “F” section past, *Closets, Disposals, Doors, Electrical Outlets, Fireplaces* until he finally came to *Furnaces*. It was a long section. He looked out at Medusa. She had quieted down. Ducts lay limply like spaghetti and the little red face in the fire box door had cooled down to orange and black. He had a minute to read.

The first thing he came upon under furnaces was a description of the Flibbertigibbet.

This fire imp likes to dance among

the flames of a furnace. Extremely dim-witted, it is theorized that the Flibbertigibbet mistakes the flames of a furnace for a fairy circle. More annoying than dangerous due to off-key singing and inane jabbering. Identification is the primary problem in dealing with a Flibbertigibbet as they resemble a candle flame. Treatment: simply turn off furnace. The flame that does not go out is your imp.

Ricky was startled back into the moment by the crash of a duct. Medusa had reawakened and had begun bashing the remains of his grandfather’s tool box. The face in the firebox looked gleeful. Well, it was clear he wasn’t dealing with one of those Flibbertigibbets.

Next he read about something called a Dybbuk.

This devilet takes up residence within the fire of furnace then sends out tendrils of gloom that consume light. Because this species does not affect the heating of a home, it can go undetected for a time. Eventually it will outgrow a furnace and left unchecked will shroud a basement in gloom. In advanced cases whole houses have been made so gloomy as to be uninhabitable.

Nope, he thought, *not one of those*. The next entry was entitled: Ashboy.

The Ashboy resembles a tar baby when cool and a flaming child when hot. It succors its longing for Hellfire by taking up residence in a furnace. He will greedily hoard its heat, making a home uninhabitable if there is no other heat source. Worse, an Ashboy’s cravings for fire can cause him to dangerously over-heat a furnace. In

some cases this has led to the incineration of the house.

That's it, Ricky thought. A screech came from the furnace. The ducts were repeatedly smashing something that looked like a set of salad tongs.

He scanned the chapter and found the section on extracting Ashboys.

The Ashboy is squirmy and difficult to handle. Flame retardant gloves are recommended as well as a Hell Spawn Extractor coated with ground martyr's teeth.

He peered out from beneath the stairs. The fire in the Medusa's mouth had died down again and the little head couldn't be seen.

Now's my chance, he thought. He double-checked the illustration in the book. It showed an Ashboy screaming as it was pinched by a set of tongs. *Tongs, tongs, where did I see tongs?* There they were, right in front of the firebox door. They had been beaten into the floor but they looked like they were still intact. He started to inch toward them. He hoped Ashboys were hard of hearing.

"I heeaarr you preacher man," said a gravelly voice from the furnace.

Pastor Ricky froze and tiny beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. He tried to control a rising sense of panic. Why hadn't he realized it could talk? Until that moment he'd thought of it sort of like a pesky raccoon. Now he saw what he was up against—something supernatural, something intelligent, something damned for all eternity.

Everything began to tip and he felt queasy. A foreboding came over him and grew, like a rapidly expanding thunderhead, supercharged and heavy. He wanted to get as small as possible and let it pass.

"I know what you're up to, preacher man." The ducts began to rise and collect themselves. Two beady points of red looked out at him.

"Be reasonable," the devil purred. *"That old lady up there doesn't even like you. She's nothing but an old gossip. She's meddlesome and spiteful; that's why her children never visit. You should have heard her on the phone just before you came in. She was talking about you, you know, and the shirt you wore in church. And that wasn't all; you should have heard what she said about your wife. Why bother with her? Just leave her to me, I can teach her a lesson. She deserves it, you know she does."*

As it spoke Pastor Ricky could see Sister Coulesey gabbing on the phone, the loose flesh of her chin quivering as she spoke. He felt revulsion and indignation. His heart said yes, the hellish thing was telling the truth, and a hardness formed at the back of his neck. A cold, dilapidated house was a fitting place for the old hen. But the vision continued for some reason and Pastor Ricky saw more: he saw a pair of mittens—fingerless, childish mittens—and he saw them cupped around an old lonesome face.

He mustered up his courage and dove for the tongs. He managed to roll away in time to avoid the crashing metal snakes. He landed in some old paint cans and felt a sharp pain in his side.

The demon was really agitated now. The ducts flew in a mad commotion, smashing posts and sending boxes of Christmas garland into the air.

Pastor Ricky examined the tongs. They were bigger than he had supposed. It took two hands to use them. Each tong was coated with white stuff, probably ground martyr's teeth, he realized with a mixture of awe and horror. But the feature that seemed most peculiar was the wooden spike that ran up a channel on one of the handles.

"You know you're no match for me," the

demon taunted. *“I’ve corrupted bishops and deceived theologians! Who are you?”* It began cursing, in English at first, then in other languages.

Pastor Ricky had slipped behind the water heater again and from there he assessed his chances. The ducts were a problem but he saw that they were useless in close to the furnace. They just weren’t bendable enough. He also saw that the demon was blind on the backside if it didn’t come out of the firebox. If he could come up from behind and edge around from there he might be able to get close enough to get a hold of it.

“Please, you don’t really think you can sneak up on me, do you? Fixing furnaces really isn’t your job, is it? It’s deacon work. Besides—it’s your day off!” the demon said. Then it started laughing.

Pastor Ricky managed to get behind it by sliding along a cellar wall. The ducts flailed. He had the tongs ready and he began to work his way to the front of the furnace. The opening to the firebox was on his left. He tested the tongs. They opened and closed smoothly. He tensed, preparing to leap forward.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the demon sing-songed from within. *“You won’t like what you find!”*

The foreboding grew, the crushing weight.

He lunged, swinging around, thrusting the tongs into the firebox. He clamped down hard on something fleshy and squirming. It nearly tore the tongs from his hands. A rising whine rose and rose from the other end of the tongs, unnerving him, tempting him to let go.

As he drew it out he steeled himself.

It was not what he expected. He thought it would look like the illustration in the book, like a flaming child. Instead what he saw was so shocking, so utterly repulsive, he nearly dropped it. Every fiber of his being,

every sinew and bone recoiled from it.

There in the tongs, grinning and leering back at him with a wicked little face all twisted was a miniature version of himself in a Hawaiian shirt.

“I’m you! I’m you!” it screamed.

“It’s me! It’s me!” Pastor Ricky cried.

“If you kill me, you’ll only kill yourself, Pastor Ricky, and we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

He didn’t want to believe it—yet he did. But rather than self-pity he felt disgust, that and hatred. He pinned himself to the ground. He knew what the spike was for now.

“No, no! You fool! Don’t you see? It’ll be the end of you! Don’t do something you’ll regret! I can help you!”

Two voices screamed the scream of death.

When Reverend Clay awoke he lay upon the dirt floor among piles of decaying Reader’s Digests. Hot air was blowing on him from a limp duct near his face. Nearby the tongs stood like a set of oversized scissors thrust into the ground. The Ashboy was gone. But there was a blood stain in the center of Reverend Clay’s chest.

He felt the stain: it was still wet. He reached beneath his shirt and felt a little hole.

The kitchen door opened. “Pastor, is everything all right?”

“Uh, yes, Sister Coulesey,” he said weakly. “I believe I’ve fixed the furnace. It’ll just take me a little while to wrap things up.”

“Praise the Lord! Yes, I do feel some heat coming up the stairs. Thank you, Pastor.” “You’re welcome, Sister Coulesey.”

“I’ll make you some tea.”

“That would be nice.”

It took a little time to put the ducts back. Before long warm air was being pumped upstairs and the creaks of an old house warming began to sound.

Reverend Clay collected his grandfather’s tools and put them away along with *Strong’s Guide*. The tongs took some

work to remove from the floor.

He dusted himself off as best he could and unrolled his sleeves. His suit jacket slipped on easily and he could have sworn, if he were a swearing man, that it fit more comfortably than before.

When he got upstairs the kitchen was already toasty. Sister Coulsey's overcoat was off and she wore a grateful smile. Tea waited for him on the table along with a dish of

crackers, the kind old folks like.

As they sat, Sister Coulsey said sheepishly, "Pastor, have I ever told you how nice you look in black?"

A smile crossed the Reverend Richard Jehu Clay's face. "Why thank you, Sister Coulsey. I suspect I'll wear it more often from now on."

"Oh, that's so nice," Sister Coulsey replied. "I'm so pleased."

