

## The Boy Who Cried Fire

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*by Sarah Ditum*

I moved house a few months ago. Of course, it was exhausting – they say it's more stressful than losing your job or being bereaved, and it's even worse if the idiots you buy the house off decide to leave you with all their crap to sort through. There were skiploads of it. I don't think the cellar had been touched in decades. There were all sorts of things down there: mouldy chintz curtains, chests of drawers with broken legs, and these creepy looking teddy bears tumbled in the dirt, like someone had been playing with them. They were so horrible, I couldn't even touch them. I think they're still there.

And there was this picture. Honestly, I've never seen anything like this picture. It was propped up next to the bears, and it was of this boy. I mean, I like kids, but this one looked like the kind you'd try to ditch in the playground. Weird eyes, wonky. And he was crying, which is no wonder because the poor freak was dressed like fucking Pierrot. Clown suit, stupid hat with a pompom on, the lot. That went in the skip, right on top, and someone – Christ knows who – must have liked the look of it, because the next day it was gone. Just nicked it out of my rubbish.

Anyway, I took a picture of it and tweeted it, and this girl I know – she's a paranormal researcher so she's into all kinds of bizarre shit. You go to the pub with your mates at the weekend, she goes looking for the Rutland panther. It's her hobby. This girl, she tells me that it was quite a popular print in the 1970s. You know that green lady one? The Chinese girl? This was a similar sort of deal, the kind of thing you'd find hanging in your nana's living room next to porcelain ballerinas and crochet antimacassars.

Only there's a story about this one. Apparently, in the 70s there was a spate of house fires – of course there were, it was the 70s, nasty polyester curtains dangling near dodgy

electric heaters and smoking a fag on your flammable foam sofa. Pretty much everything about the 70s was designed to turn your house into a flame grill. And there were loads of copies of this picture around. It sold by the thousand, so it's no wonder that a few of them got caught up in these house fires.

But this is the weird part, this is the reason why my friend knows about this horrible painting. Whenever the painting was found after these fires, it would be lying face down on the floor. The flames didn't even touch it. It just lay there, everything around it blackened and stinking, crying its wonky eyes out into a pristine patch of carpet. It got so that firemen were actually afraid of it. Big burly guys with a massive hose who didn't mind walking into plumes of smoke and raging heat, too frightened to go near this picture. Ridiculous, right? Except this picture had spooked me out and before I even knew about the fire thing.

So this is all very diverting but I'm pretty busy with the new house, I've got problems with the kitchen plumbing to fix and the plaster in the hall needs patching. I don't have time to think about ugly 1970s home decor. And then it happens. I wake up in bed one night with blue lights flickering in my eyes. Sirens are screaming and there's smoke in the air, thick smoke, the kind that smells like death and ruin. I cover my mouth and lean out the window to see what's happening, and I can *feel* it straight away. Hot on my cheeks, raw, like when you lean over the barbecue for too long.

Only this heat isn't coming from a foot away. It's coming from a house on the opposite side of my street, two doors down. The kids who live there are all standing outside – it's a student house, so you can guess what happened. Someone's smoking away in the front room, they've nodded off, spliff in hand, hot rocks on the carpet and – voom! Up it goes. They probably had all kinds of easy-burn crap in that front room, because I'd seen them staggering back with some prize piece of vintage tat four or five times just in the few weeks I'd been living there. They were into thrift stores, car boots, all that kind of stuff. Even skip diving probably.

And that's when I picked up my phone. I was going to tweet about the fire, but when I

tried to select the camera to take a picture, all that happened was that *he* appeared on my screen. I'm tapping and tapping it, pressing away on the home button, and all I can see is this horrible little clown kid with tears pouring down his face. More tears than I remembered, and they're sort of glittering – maybe that's something to do with the screen. But what's definitely not to do with screen is this: my phone feels hot. You know those stories about the batteries in smartphones overheating and exploding in people's hands? This is hot like that, and the longer I look at it, the hotter it gets.

This is where I lose it. I can't even turn my phone off, the crying boy is just staring at me and I'm sure my phone's about to go nuclear, and now I'm running to the coldest part of my house, right down into the basement, right to the back where those creepy teddies were lying, and I just drop the phone there and leave it. I can't think of anything else to do. Of course I can't sleep now, so I slam the trapdoor and lie down with my ear against it, listening for anything that sounds like crackling.

Eventually I must have passed out though, because when I wake up it's light outside. There's a faint smell of burning, but the air is still and I realise that last night I just cracked up a bit. The smoke, the stress, it all just got too much. But this is the really strange part – and I promise it's true. When I get myself together, and go to collect my phone again, the teddies have moved. Just as though some child had been playing with them.