

The Man Beneath The Carpet

In time, maybe I will forget, the sights and sounds of what I had believed to have been a man beneath my carpet. Even as I sit here now in my North London home, the mere mention of him sounds preposterous. Had I lived through it at all, I still wonder to myself? Yes. I have the nightmares of him to remind me.

I say 'him' as if I had seen his face, but I had not. I say that he lived beneath my carpet, but that too is not entirely the truth. There is so much that I feel I should unburden, even if they are just words on a page, but perhaps if I can at least put the past few years into some sort of cohesion, then it might not seem so terrible.

The clock on the wall tells me it's getting close to midnight - what was once the carpet man's favourite time - but I am glad to see that my hands are not shaking. There used to be a time when every night I would begin to shake just at the thought of his imminent arrival. I wonder if those times are over now. I haven't seen him for a while.

Perhaps I should explain a little about myself first. I am twenty five years old now, and alone, but when I first started seeing the carpet man, I was not much older than twelve, I think. There would only have been fleeting glimpses then, a slippery shadow cast across the floor or an unexpected shifting movement, and only if I were to wake during the night. I'm not sure what I thought of those early glimpses, or whether I even registered them as real, but as time went on and I began to realise that there was something there, I realised also that this was some kind

of secret never to be told. There was nothing I could tell my parents, of course, I knew that much at least. I was certain that it would be dismissed as a child's attention-grabber, because I was a child, after all. So it became something of a solitary event over those first few months, a spectacle of something extraordinary that I could not tell another living person, not even as those glimpses became more and more frequent, and the sight of him changed from perplexing to ghastly.

I've just moved my chair closer to the window so that I can write more easily by the light coming in from the streetlamps outside. My back is towards the wall just behind me as always though. My fear of something creeping behind me is an old but rational one, and it's just something that I've had to live with. Anyway, I can see through the window and down into the street below, which is quiet at the moment, but it will be buzzing with traffic come the morning. I like North London. It distracts me. There is plenty of noise and plenty of people, and plenty of hard surfaces to walk on. I always thought it strange that he didn't like hard floors. I guessed that he just couldn't get beneath them. It had been an amusing thought, in a way. I liked it.

I think I may have turned thirteen when the appearances began to increase. I'm still not sure to this day whether he used to wake me in the night or not, but I do know that I always used to open my eyes to the sight of him. Between my bed and the bedroom door he used to stay, just his head and shoulders forcing the carpet up. It wasn't that he stretched the carpet up in any way, or tugged it away from the walls, but it just seemed to form some neat little package around him. Not so neat that I could ever see his

features, but neat enough to show me that he was there and watching.

Was his mood ever malevolent? I don't know, but there were countless times when I was scared and I seemed to think so. Cruel, evil, spiteful; all words that I used over the years to describe his encounters with me. He would rise several nights in a row, sometimes, roving beneath my bedroom carpet. Round and round the room he'd go, for no reason but to torment me, to keep me awake. He sometimes made no noise at all, and sometimes he'd make a scratching sound. I used to feel unbalanced, as though I might topple inside, and I would cry, and pull at my hair to make him stop, but he would not, and he would only disappear when he felt like it. For years I could do nothing but lie in bed beneath his mercy. I wanted to scream out to my parents sleeping in the next room to tell them of the man that kept me from my own sleep, but I knew that I mustn't. The man beneath the carpet was for me to see, and nobody else. I knew that he would disappear back to wherever he came from the moment anyone took a step outside my room, or laid their hand upon my door. It wasn't until I put faith in my own bravery, however, that I realised just what lengths the carpet man was prepared to go to, just to frighten me.

I must have put up with helplessness for at least a year or more before I finally tried to leave my room. I'd only just begun to sleep with the door open, so that the light from the landing could spill into my room. I don't know why I thought that would help. Perhaps I reasoned somewhere in my head that my parents might glance in one night while the carpet man was there and catch him. I never stopped to think what they might have done about it. But this one night,

though, the night when I managed to muster all my courage and make a run for the open door, was the night that seemed, in hindsight, almost a turning point in my life with him, and it turned out to be a turning point for the worse.

I remember that I woke to the sound of him scratching across the floorboards. At first I couldn't see him, but then he appeared from behind the corner of the bed as he moved across the room, the carpet shifting evenly and smoothly as he glided beneath it. He came to halt in his usual place and stopped to look at me. As I've already said, he had no eyes that I could see, but there was no mistaking that he had them, and that he had them on me. My hands were already shaking, which made easing my bed covers down more difficult, but I didn't want him to know what I was about to do.

I took a breath as I tensed all the muscles in my body, and then started to count down my escape; three, two, one. I reached zero and then froze. I couldn't do it. I thought that he would suddenly grow arms from the depths of the carpet, arms that I had never even seen him possess for over a year, and grab hold of me and pull me down. At that age, and even at my present age now, I still don't know what kind of logic could've made me believe that my bed was the safest place to have been, and that if he'd have wanted to grab hold of me he could have done so long before. However, after that count to zero, I took another breath, held it, tensed my muscles afresh, but still couldn't manage to make that dash from my bed. There was no catalyst, no single moment to instigate my flight. The house was silent, the carpet man had ceased his scratching, and the only sound I could hear

was the heavy thumping of my own heart. I tried the countdown once more, the numbers descending this time with the pounding in my head and chest. When I reached zero a third time, I forced myself up onto my elbows. The movement was small, but it was enough to give me momentum. With the covers already eased back I urged my legs out from under them, thrusting my feet down towards the floor. I was quick, but the man beneath the carpet was quicker.

My foot touched not the floor at all but the carpet over his head. I remember looking down at the sight of him there and holding a scream in my throat. I had been seeing this man for over a year, but never once had I made any kind of physical contact with him. Here I was, though, upright and standing on top of him. I lurched forward awkwardly in a kind of half-stumble, but he was there to catch my second footfall. I stepped back, and again he moved so that he was beneath me. I tried making for the open door, but each time I put my foot down towards the floor, his head and shoulders would shift beneath the carpet to be there waiting for me.

Within a few strides it seemed obvious that I couldn't make it at all, and I stumbled back towards my bed, his faceless head there beneath me with each step to bear me up. I lay back crying for much of the night after that, shaking and huddled with my arms around my head. You cannot begin to understand how frightening all of this was for me, to have a creature come into my room every night and for me not be able to do anything or tell anyone about it. There was no excuse I could think of in order for me to even sleep in any room but my own. As things transpired, however, it seemed that any kind of escape such as that would

have been futile anyway, for it turned out that he was not restricted just to my bedroom.

I think it must have been either my fourteenth or fifteenth birthday when he came beneath a carpet in a room of the house that was not my bedroom. I'd had some friends from school round for a party and we'd just finished eating. Wandering through into the living room, I waited on the sofa while they went to collect the presents that they'd left in the hallway on their arrival. Eagerly anticipating their return, it was just seconds before they came back through the doorway that I caught sight of him. A movement behind the television was enough to catch my attention, and even with the sound of their footsteps growing louder along the hallway, I couldn't stop myself gazing into the darkness there. The carpet was raised, of course, and I could see the outline of his head and shoulders, motionless as he watched me.

My joy drained out of me in an instant. I still recall the sight of my friends tumbling through into the living room, and their expressions of glee dropping in a matter of seconds as they saw me. My face must have been disturbing for them to look at, so shocked and afraid was I by the sudden and unexpected sight of the carpet man's presence in the living room. They didn't stay long after that. The air of happiness had gone, drained like water down the hole in a sink.

He used to appear frequently after that, all over the house, but never so that anyone else could see him; when someone had just left the room, when my mother had turned her back for a moment, when my father was dozing. These were his favourite times,

when I could not shout "There he is, the carpet man is over there, don't you see him?" I hated him for that more than anything, I think. He would not let me share him. I had him all to myself, whether I wanted him or not. That was the deal, I think, too. That I had no say, no will.

I'm drifting. I don't want to get back into all that negative stuff. It's taken far too long to get as far as I have, without giving him the satisfaction of going through it all again. Where had I got to? Oh yes, my birthday, and how he had managed to make even that day his own.

I can't say that I began to get used to seeing him everywhere whenever he felt like it, because I didn't. Nighttime had been bad enough, but then he started to appear during the day as well. There wasn't a time when I was in that house that I could honestly not expect him to appear. In the morning while I was in the bathroom, he would push up the carpet and watch me in the shower. If I was eating in the kitchen, I would see or hear him beneath the carpet in the hallway. Even climbing the stairs, I would glance behind me to see him at the bottom, only to have him appear and waiting in front of me on the landing and trail after me like a dog from one room to the other. Only when I was not alone, could I be sure he would not show himself. But even in that I could not relax. He'd shown me so many surprises over the span of seven years that I deemed him capable of anything.

A car has pulled up down in the street, a blue one, the blonde girl and her boyfriend who live across the street. I can see them moving about inside, but not so much that I can see what they doing. I'm two storeys up. My view is expansive, but not good for spying

through car windows. She's getting out and waiting for him to get out also so that she can lock it. He does now, and the yellow indicators flash as she points her keys at it. They ascend the steps leading up to the front door. He's got his arms around her waist and is kissing her neck as she tries to find the lock with her key. It's her place, I think, but he stays a few nights a week. I've seen them making love a few times when they've left the curtains undrawn. They seem quite passionate. Tonight will be another one of those nights, I guess.

I was older and dating when the carpet man threw yet another of his surprises at me. I was at college, and seeing someone from my English class. We were at a pub in Kilburn, I think it was, with a few of our other friends from the college, when I saw him. Since the years of his appearing throughout my parent's house, it seemed that he had picked up a few new skills along the way. The pub was crowded, a welcome distraction from my home life, but that seemed not to bother him. It was as I sat at one of the tables, talking and laughing with my friends, that I saw him. I glanced across at one of the white plastered walls, and saw his head and shoulders rippling beneath it. I was so stunned by the sudden sight of him that I dropped my drink. The glass hit the wooden table with a loud thud, spilling its contents before tumbling into my lap and onto the floor. This brought hysterics from my friends, and to a certain degree dispelled the shock of seeing the carpet man again. Not wanting to leave the group, but realising I had to, I made my excuses and reluctantly got up from the table to go back to the bar and get myself another drink.

The shaking in my hands returned there and then, and I feared that I would drop my drink a second time

as soon as I got served. I remained at the bar, however, shivering and perspiring, while the din from the crowded pub echoed in my ears. The cigarette smoke seemed to sting my eyes and sinuses, my head was pounding, and I could only barely concentrate on standing upright.

Although the pub was extremely busy, a movement in my peripheral vision caught my attention enough for me to glance round at it. It was the carpet man, and he was roving beneath the plastered walls across the room towards where I was standing. I watched as he suddenly changed course and veered up and across the ceiling and then down behind the bar. The bottles of spirits rattled in their mountings as he moved behind the wall to which they were attached, but somehow nobody else noticed. Lines of glasses chinked as he forced them from their stationary places, shuddering on their shelves as though in the grip of an earthquake, but still no one glanced his way.

My hands were trembling so much that I thought I might drop the money I was holding onto the ground and not have enough sanity to stoop to pick it up. I could feel the sweat on my brow cooling as a draft blew through the bar, beads of it breaking away to track down into my eyes. I wiped them away swiftly so that I could keep my sight fixed on the carpet man. He had come to rest beside the till, his head and shoulders raising one of the beer towels up off the bar, it's rectangular cloth forming neat folds around him. I felt like screaming, but knew that I could not in such a place. I glanced back towards my friends to see if they were ready to leave, but they were talking boisterously, throwing their heads back now with fits of laughter. What could I do?

I became aware of somebody talking beside me. I turned dumbly in his direction and realised that he was talking to me. Did I know him? I had no idea. I still don't know to this day if it was someone I knew, or whether it was some innocent stranger. I thought perhaps he was asking if I was waiting to be served, but cohesion came swiftly and I realised, somewhat foolishly, that he was trying to chat me up, asking if he could buy me a drink. My thoughts were racing uncontrollably and for some reason I must have said yes. I was glad to be able to step away from the bar for a few seconds so that I could catch my breath, but as soon as the man turned around and held my drink out for me, I panicked and fled.

I never returned to that pub in Kilburn. In fact shortly after that I dropped out of college altogether. My friends quizzed me frequently about what had happened. I couldn't answer them, and to be honest, I couldn't face looking at or even talking to them at all after that. I couldn't return home either, not to the house where the carpet man had lived with me for so long. So I found myself travelling north, and to a small one bedroom flat in Manchester, where I lived fairly reasonably for a while. I got myself a job doing menial work in an office. I went out most Saturday nights. I started seeing someone from work. Then one night at a club, the outline of a head glided effortlessly across the dance floor, it's slippery shifting shape startling beneath the white flashes of a strobe light. What else can I say? I ran.

From Manchester I went further north to Liverpool, and again tried to make things work. I lasted over a year until the carpet man tore beneath the pavement in front of me, lifting slabs up to the left and right. I

stood there just standing and staring at him. Passers-by grunted and cursed as they were forced to walk around me, but I could simply not deal with the sight of seeing him once again.

Eventually I left Liverpool, of course, and travelled further north and across the border into Scotland. I found a small rural community, but the quietness of the place just unsettled me, reminding me of the quietness of my parent's own home. Edinburgh was much more to my liking, but again the carpet man found me. This went on for a few years, an endless circle of travelling and settling, the days of imminent flight constantly unnerving. I can not begin to tell you the depression and loneliness of those years, not being able to tell another living being. I might perhaps have tried with some of the people I grew relatively close to over that period, but after the experience back in that pub in Kilburn, where nobody else had witnessed what I had seen, I knew that this was something personal and terrifying for me and me alone.

I can see the moon over the roofs of the buildings opposite now that the clouds have cleared, and it is large and white and beautiful. I can see a number of stars also in the breach of cumulus, twinkling brightly. They, too, are alone, I guess. Millions of miles separate them, but from here, they all seem like part of one wonderful connected family, glittering together and blessing us with the ability to watch them.

I've been here in North London for only a few months, and Kilburn is not that far away. I've been thinking of returning there and perhaps trying to find that pub again. Don't ask me why. I don't think I could tell you even if I wanted to. The street outside is quiet again, and it echoes the silence of this room. I can sit

here without moving, and without listening to the scratch of my pen across this paper, the silence is unnerving. Are those shadows moving? There, by the wall. I look but I can see nothing now. Perhaps it was my imagination. Daybreak will come in a few hours and I can return to my new job in the city. There are a lot of people in the city, and where there are a lot of people, there is also a lot of noise. It's something that I've grown to love, noise. It helps stop my hands from shaking. Hell, it stops my whole body from shaking. Those shadows, they are moving. I sit up a little straighter and stare at them, but there seems to be nothing in them now. I reach for my cigarette lighter and hold the flame to the stub of the joint which I can barely hold in my fingers. As the blue smoke curls lightly into the air, I inhale gratefully as I press my head against the cold glass of the window and gaze down into the street below. My car is parked at the kerb just outside the entrance to my flat. I like to know that it's handy.