

The Smoke Boy

By Jeff Shelnett

1.

Once upon a time, across the road and over the fence that ran along the ridge and then on down the hill, there was a dark and mysterious forest. This forest was a dark and magical and wonderful place that was, therefore, avoided at all costs by the people of the nearby towns and villages that resided beyond its borders. The forest minded not one whit as that left itself and its magic whole and complete. So it had existed for years upon millennia. It was a thick tangle of a wood with great and grand and terrible trees that soared high overhead, their twisted and gnarled branches robbing the floor below of what little sunlight managed to find its way through. Thus, the floor of the forest was overgrown with twisted, tripping runners, rope thick vines with wicked thorns – this more than anything really kept the people from invading the forest, no one particularly wants skinned up knees and scratched up arms. The wicked vines masked secret animal paths, and lined the swift, burbling streams that ran in the depths of the dark woods. And in those dim protected places strange multi-colored spiders spun gorgeous, rainbow hued webs that glistened with constant dew and waited for the fat, lazy and more unobservant of insects to become stuck. Monstrous segmented centipedes scuttled and crawled in the decaying bed of the forest, and a thousand other creeping things made their slimy, chittering way about the wooded floor. But as dark as it was, deeper in the forest, well into the heart of the wood, in a place where sunlight seldom shone and even shadows fought for space; where the ground and the bark on the trees were rarely dry, there was a strange clearing. And in that clearing resided a House.

To say this House, this twisting, bent and leaning structure was out of place so deep in the forest could do no justice to the actual sight of the thing. A kudzu-covered monstrosity that sat as though reflected in a funhouse mirror. Yet, the House existed to suit its own purpose alone in its vast, strange clearing.

The front of the House opened to an enormous slate-laid porch with four weather-stained columns that seemed to reach dizzying heights, yet were strangely short and squat once a careful and studious eye was put upon them. The windows framing the porch peered out inquisitively, never betraying the dark happenings inside. They simply stared in perpetual befuddlement at their surroundings. A thick-running carpet of kudzu, emerald green, clung to every available surface. It battled with the House for every spare inch of space. The House, much to its chagrin, over its many years of standing alone in the clearing, had taken on a decidedly bushy and unkempt appearance, and only the windows, roof and porch were oddly free of the creeping vine.

The massive front doors had somehow managed to stay free of the kudzu. Some of the old luster still beamed out defiantly from the diminished wood and, like the columns, the doors seemed both too large and too squat at the same time, almost too small to let anyone pass. The porch itself had been covered in great, greasy, green and yellow lichen cascading down the steps to the weed-cracked flagstone path that ran the length of the kudzu covered front lawn to the ancient rust-ridden wrought iron gate that served as the entrance to the property. And though almost drowning in the sea of invading vine, there were hundreds, maybe thousands of beautiful, fragile stemmed, sweet smelling wild flowers; there were tasty wild blackberry and raspberry bushes running amok throughout the yard that had grown, as if ignoring completely the suffocating flora surrounding them, into huge bristling bushes and were heavy

with sweet berries. Scattered about the yard were numerous wrought-iron benches and marble birdbaths and stone fountains. The tenuous grasp of the leafy kudzu vine draped these things and left one the impression that they had been covered for protection until the occupants of the house returned the next season. They stood forth, melancholy testaments to an age long past.

How long the House had stood in the overgrown clearing in the middle of the forest none could, say for the House had known no visitors within its doors in ages.

It just was.

And being just was it was here, of course, that the Smoke Boy lived.

2.

The Smoke Boy had lived in the House for as long as he remembered remembering and had, to his recollection, never left the house. Nor had he ever remembered perceiving any real desire to venture forth into the great unknown that existed just outside the windows of the House. He whiled away his time, contentedly gliding about the House and ensuring that there were no cracks or gaps or openings around the windows and doors.

The Smoke Boy lived in a great and abiding fear of the Wind and as such he took great care in the careful plugging of any gap, opening, hole, or crevice where the evil Wind might seek out and find an opening and succeed, finally, in entering the House with its boon companion the dread Breeze. It was the Smoke Boy's firm belief that the Wind was no kind being whose job it was to fluff the leaves on trees or shape the ever-changing clouds or scatter the varied scents of the land far and wide. No! No, indeed. He believed that the Wind, in fact, was an evil spirit that existed only to hound and threaten him; to seek him out in the safety of the House; to pester him and force him outside where it would all be over for him in an instant. Therefore, the Smoke Boy was always on guard against the evil plotting of the Wind.

The Smoke Boy filled his days thusly: he began first thing in the morning in the basement with its damp earthiness and musty odors. He would inspect the walls and ensure the tiny basement windows were locked tight, the seals of the windows still snug and firm. He inspected the mortar between the bricks to ensure it was still holding tight and not crumbling into powder. It was cool and damp in this portion of

the House and there were racks and racks of corked, dust covered bottles with fancy labels lining the walls. The Smoke Boy could spend hours marveling at the beautiful, curling script and colorful pictures filling out the spaces of the faded labels. Often, when the light was just right, he would place the bottles on the window sill and watch as the sunlight danced and played with joyous color casting wavy, liquid patterns on the walls of the basement. He would dance in the colors, swaying and moving to his own music.

After examining the racks or carefully replacing the bottles back into the wire-framed holes, the Smoke Boy would check the other various rooms of the basement. Many of these rooms were empty, but a few were filled with great and ancient leather or canvas covered steamer trunks whose contents were locked up tight and that missed their keys and stank mightily of mothballs. He would always check to make sure the chests were still locked and then he would look about for the keys, searching the corners, the beams above, the various nails in the wood – anyplace that seemed to him a likely hiding place for keys. He never found any. He always hoped that the chests would be magically and miraculously opened, but, alas, year after year they never were. And he had not the strength to force the locks on the chests.

Once finished with the basement the Smoke Boy would pause at the bottom of the steps to the basement and listen intently to the House. It had a distinct voice. In its depths it was a deep and vibrating “**thrummm**”; on the main floors it was a warm and musical “**hummmmm**”; in the attic...well, he tried not think about the attic. But the Smoke Boy always listened to the Houses sounds. They were wise and familiar and warm and comforting – for the most part, and held many secrets if listened to well. After finishing his rounds in the basement and pausing to listen to the particular music

of the House, he would take time to look into his magnificent treasure chest that was hidden in the space beneath the stairs.

O! it was a great and wonderful chest; a huge wooden thing that smelled of sharp, clean cedar, a welcome respite from the normal musty, moldy smells of the basement. The chest had large rusty hinges and an enormous brass lock that had turned blue-green and crusty with age. To this chest the Smoke Boy had a key; a key securely hidden away where no one could possibly find it and he guarded the secret with his very life. Although, he had never had to defend his treasure...ever...but he was prepared. He would, after carefully studying his surroundings for any lurking intruders, take the key from its brilliant hiding place, slide it into the keyhole, and turn the squealing lock. He would open the huge, arched, iron rimmed lid slowly, hoping and wishing with all his might, eyes shut tight, that all his treasures had not somehow been stolen during the night while he slept. The Smoke Boy never failed to be delighted when he opened his eyes and saw that the treasure lay as before: safe and sound and completely undisturbed. He would pause and breathe deeply the scents of the box – the cedar, clean and bright – mixed with the decaying paint – thin and sharp, mixed with the disintegrating paper and vegetable ink – thick and dusty. He would gently, ever so gently, reach in and bring out the large black, canvass backed photo album that held his prized photographs. He would raise the black tome from its place of honor and inspect it to see if the pictures had changed at all. The photographs were faded and cracked and fragile with age, and he always handled the book tenderly. He would look to see if the people in the pictures had switched places while he had been away or if they had stopped smiling their gentle smiles or if they had lifted their hands and placed them slyly elsewhere. The people in the old photographs were always dressed very formally. The Man always wore a dark suit and tie with a vest. A round

bowler sat high on his head and he had a wide, dark browed, unsmiling, mustachioed face. The Woman always wore a high collared blouse ringed with lace and ruffles, her hair beautiful and large, her hands always folded neatly in her lap, a faint soft smile lighting up her face. Her eyes always seemed to follow him no matter how he moved in relation to the picture. Finally, there was the Little Boy.

The Boy had curls and wore short pants and a dark naval jacket with a scarf tied around the collar. A beret sat tilted jauntily upon his head and he looked as if something had struck him as the funniest thing he had ever heard, such was the wide, toothless smile on his face and the cut of his eye. Had the Smoke Boy known the word he would have said the Little Boy was a cherub – fat cheeks, bright eyes, thin curling hair peeking out from the beret.

The Smoke Boy could gaze at the Family for hours and daydream about the exciting and adventurous lives they led. Surely they were a Family that lived for travel – world travel, ocean travel, travels by ship and wagon and train. He imagined them upon the high seas soon to be shipwrecked upon a deserted island; he could see them climbing up a mountain, then careening back down, or perhaps in a sled dragged by a great shaggy, frost encrusted hound as their mode of conveyance; he saw them in an iron monster roaring along, steam spewing from the stack, on narrow steel tracks that disappeared over the horizon and were laid across an autumnal landscape of fiery, exploding colors. All this and more he fantasized about and saw in his mind's eye. Finished, he would always close the book carefully and place it aside so as not to accidentally cause damage.

Sometimes, after setting the photo book aside, he might try on one of the two moth eaten hats he so loved because they, more than anything, made him seem as

though he were like the people in the picture – solid and real. He would place the hat on his head and pretend to be a severe, but kind man. When he did this, the hat would set for a moment but then would begin its slow descent as it always drifted leisurely to the floor. He would recover it quickly and place it back into the chest with a sigh.

The chest was filled to bursting with a great assortment of knick-knacks – buttons and pins, pictures and rings, brooches with ivory silhouettes and faded rose backgrounds. There was a toy ice wagon, its paint chipping, the horse seemingly sad and sagging, its wheels bent from use, the tin dull with age. There were spools of thread and stacks of strange looking paper with numbers and people’s heads on them, wooden games with most of the pieces missing, picture books teaching the alphabet; there were feathers and rocks and faded flowers pressed between wax paper and bound in a large picture album. There was a single link of cuff, a box of pen nibs, several keys (that went to nothing in the house – he had tried them all, and tried them still), a rusty pocket knife attached with a lanyard to a pocket watch and a yellowed ivory die. There were several coins with strange pictures and writing on them, several pencils with petrified erasers, an empty fountain pen, an empty ink bottle, a bottle of talcum powder that still held onto its perfumed scent. There were silk scarves, two pair of linen gloves, a pair of wire framed glasses, a monocle, a candle, a pipe box, two tins of shoe polish (black and brown) a brush, another small folding blade pocket knife and two narrow boxes with tall fluted champagne glasses. And, buried at the bottom, hidden away underneath it all, a small tin box.

All of the other items he would lift from their places and set carefully aside, taking careful stock of each item. And after ensuring all was as he had left it, he would lift out the tin box and open it, and carefully lift out hundreds of the small toy soldiers. He would set them about on the floor and fight battle after battle –

Thermopylae, Agincourt, Trenton, Cowpens, Shiloh, Gettysburg and more that he made up. The soldiers fought across the field of the basement floor, used the stairs to seize the high ground. Back and forth the battles raged. They were epic in nature and with him in charge Moscow fell in an afternoon.

He would play for long hours, until he finally tired of the brutal tin on tin warfare. Exhausted from the sieges, he would put the soldiers lovingly away in the great chest and replace all the contents back exactly as they were before.

After ensuring all was well with the chest he would close it slowly, softly, so as not to disturb the contents or pinch some escaping corner of the treasure that lay hidden beneath the lid. He would lock it tight and hide the key, taking great pains to be cunning and stealthy in doing this, evading the sight or capture of any of those who would have his treasure.

If he did not examine the chest during his daily rounds, which was rare indeed, he would continue on with the inspection of the House. He spent hours checking all possible spots where he feared the deadly and always sneaky Wind might steal in and whisk him away. He would do this, window-by-window, wall-by-wall, door-by-door, floorboard by floorboard. The House always helped him here. All was well if the sound of the winds were muffled and distant. It was when the House whistled and coughed and buckled and spat that he had to proceed with caution. This meant that the Wind was trying its hardest to invade his House. At these times the Wind approached from up high, roof level, and attacked the loose chinks in the Houses armor. The Smoke Boy would stuff the gaps with damp mud from the basement floor. It was messy and dirty, but it left him safe and secure from the fearful Wind.

If there were no chinks or gaps to repair the Smoke Boy would then continue on his way throughout the House until he reached the Attic.

The Attic, to him, was the most wondrous and dangerous place in the whole house, and its voice was singular among all the voices the House had. The Attic's voice was thin and cold—a high whistling “**thrrrill**”, as opposed to the deep “**thrummm**” of the basement. But the Attic was untrustworthy. Many the time it had lured him up with promise of Wonders, only to find himself surrounded by the cold, predatory Wind. He would flee in a flash from these troublemakers. But always he would return to the Attic, for the reward measured against the risk was too great for him to resist. One just had to be on ones toes in the Attic. And the reward was magnificent.

As the highest spot in the surrounding area, it was here that the Smoke Boy could see over the tops of the towering trees of the Murky Forest. The Smoke Boy would sit in enchanted delight gazing out of the lone, tiny, beveled window and watch in awe as the many birds and insects flew free and away in the usually blue sky, restricted, he knew, only by their imagination and strength and stamina. He knew also that they alone chose how long or how high or how fast they might fly. The Smoke Boy would imagine himself casting off the confines of the House and Basement and Attic, to burst free and untethered into the day, and soar high above the Forest—free to be anything and everything he wished to be. He would lose himself in this fantasy as he did in all his others. Yet, in the end, he always told himself that his dream was, indeed, only a fantasy, and he always, in the end, was content to stay within the safe and secure walls of the House afraid to venture out into the unknown. And sometimes late at night he would sit by the window in the Attic and watch as the Moon made its marathon trek across the star-sparkling night. He would imagine himself riding an icy

chariot pulled by frost-mane horses in an everlasting chase of the ever-elusive Sun who always, just, evaded his grasp.

It was normally after sitting and watching out of the window in the Attic for hours on end that the Smoke Boy would have these most glorious daydreams and other, more monstrous, daymares. He would be lost in the playing field of his mind befriended only by the animals and birds and other creatures he had glimpsed from afar at the other windows of the House. He would fly with the birds through a crystal clear sky, looping and speeding through the uncounted secret paths created by himself through the Murky Forest, dodging the “wait-a-minute” vines, a smile playing on his face, Freedom for his companion. He would see himself shooting through the clouds, the wispy tendrils reaching out to caress his face, the coolness of the vapors causing his eyes to moisten, to tear. Other times a black mood overtook his soul and all he could imagine was being blown to tattered threads and scattered throughout the land, or he would, he imagined, be pursued by the faceless, shapeless, all-encompassing Wind. It was a thing that screamed hideously behind him as he fled, dodging this way and that through the maze of the Murky Forest. In his dreams the Wind would hound him, mocking and teasing with an evil, rasping, choking laugh. He would come to his senses at these times and flee the Attic and cower in fear in one of the rooms in the middle of the House; a room with no windows or doors that could open to the outside.

On the occasions when The Smoke Boy was able to reign in his fears, and, after his hours and hours at the window were past, and after insuring every nook and cranny of the house was air tight, he would retire to the huge Library of the House. Here he always stayed well away from the huge floor to ceiling windows that dominated the great west wall of the room. Easily the biggest room, the Library was far and away his favorite of the whole house, more so even than the space beneath the

stairs. It was here that he would sit for hours and hours and read from any one of the thousands of books that lined the room, from floor to roof, and on every wall. His favorites were the tomes by Thucydides and Tacitus, and Livy. There was Pyle and Verne and Stevenson and Melville and Mallory and Twain and Bulfinch and... Well, the list stretched on and on. It was here where his imagination truly soared as he savored his only true, albeit fantastical, contact with the outside world, as he knew it. He would picture himself as the Last Spartan, or the Cruel Pirate, or the Dashing Hero, or the Savage Beast, or any of the other things and beings he could barely comprehend. He lived a separate and wonderful life among the pages of these books, reveling among them and their amazing stories and beautiful illustrations. It was here that he felt the most happy and satisfied, and later most sad. For he realized, as wonderful and exciting as the stories were, he could not live them except in his imagination.

There, in the Library, was where his day usually ended. Night could find him, most times, scrunched into one of the ancient, threadbare, immense chairs that occupied the room. The Smoke Boy would be fast asleep, some book fallen to the floor, pages open. He was sung to sleep by the stories and the deep comforting voice of the House.

This was his existence and had been so for as long as he remembered remembering. And, so, he passed his days blissfully unaware of life beyond his sight and senses, and he lived through the windows and books and pictures and treasures that were life to him. Until...