The Fuse Box

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Shane was grumbling to himself as he carefully stepped up a ladder on the side of his uncle's cabin. 'Stupid lights in this stupid old cabin. I hate this place.' 'What are you whining about now, gay boy?' a voice said sharply from below. 'Just shut up and hold the ladder,' Shane said, unhitching the door of the attic and ducking under the splintered old door as it swung over him. 'I still can't believe my uncle put the fuse box in the attic. it's like he knew he wouldn't be the one going up here.' "

Cover Page Footnote

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THE FUSE BOX

BY JEFFREY SLATER

Shane was grumbling to himself as he carefully stepped up a ladder on the side of his uncle’s cabin. “Stupid lights in this stupid old cabin. I hate this place.”

“What are you whining about now, gay boy?” a voice said sharply from below.

“Just shut up and hold the ladder,” Shane said, unhitching the door of the attic and ducking under the splintered old door as it swung over him. “I still can’t believe my uncle put the fuse box in the attic. It’s like he knew he wouldn’t be the one going up here.”

“Oh come on, Shane, just get up there. Your brother is right about you—you’re such a whiny little pantywaist. Hurry up and get the lights on. I wanna start pounding that keg before everyone shows up and drinks it all. We’re getting’ wasted tonight! Here, here’s the flashlight.”

Shane turned around and the flashlight lobbed up to his unsteady hands. He reached for it hastily, nearly jerking the ladder into a sideways slide. It scared him to his core, and he tried desperately to push his weight toward the cabin.

“Nice hands you D-bag!!”

Shane ignored the insult and leaned his forearm onto the attic floor. Carl laughed to himself, very pleased to be an ass, while Shane waited for the adrenaline to pass through his heart. He did not appreciate the rush of almost falling off a ladder. “You almost killed me!” he shouted. After a few moments, he clicked on the flashlight and laid an exploratory beam across the attic. Cobwebs were everywhere. He nearly gagged.

This is the grossest thing I’ve ever seen, he thought to himself. He stood at the top of the ladder, his knees resting on the floor of the entrance to the attic (which was really more a crawl space). It was a little triangle room, with the apex of the cabin’s roof down the center. In the middle the ceiling measured four and a half feet; it sloped down to the sides so low you had to lay down to reach things against the wall. A tiny bit of rope dangled next to a lightbulb on the low ceiling, but its clicks illuminated nothing.

He had been in this attic a couple of times, but never at night. He knew that the fuse box was to the right of the doorway, toward the back of the cabin. He panned his eyes slowly as another beam floated across the attic. It was dusty, almost ancient-looking. Cobwebs were everywhere. He could see a mouse trap that had been successful but not emptied. He knew there were spiders up here; a nice dark place, high off the ground, very few visitors. He considered which corners they occupied, whether they were on or off the ground, and where they might be comfortably webbed between old boxes and buckets. His mind convinced him that he had just crawled into spider heaven.

“Dude, there’s no way I’m going in here. We’ll wait for my brother,” Shane said.

“No, peach fuzz. He told me to make sure you did it. Everyone will be getting here soon and there had better be lights on when they do. It’s dark as hell up here. You can’t have girls at a creepy-ass backwoods blackout party—they’ll freak. Get your ass in there and do this. Your brother specifically said to me, ‘Don’t let Shane chicken out.’”
“Shut up, Carl, or I swear to god…”
“What, Shane? You swear to god what?”
“You’re such a waste, bro. Seriously, my parents were right about you. I’m only 16 and you’re
giving me all this shit.” There was discomfort and fear in Shane’s voice.
He heard Carl step heavily onto the ladder and the top of it made rhythmic thwacks on the side
of the cabin as Carl ascended.
“I don’t know why my brother hangs out with you,” Shane said, “it kills me.”
Shane clicked off the flashlight, wanting to throw it against a wall. “I’ll plug him in his face,
that jerkoff,” Shane thought to himself. He cocked his arm back with the flashlight and waited for
Carl’s ugly mug to appear in the doorway. He prepared himself for some second-rate insult and he wait-
ed. Only Carl’s face never appeared in the doorway.
Instead, the door swung shut, enclosing Shane in obscene darkness.
“Carl!” he screamed. “Not funny, bro! Open then door!!”
Carl said nothing, and Shane heard only the hollow clinks of the lock going into place.
“Door opens when the lights come on, Shane,” was the muffled command. “I’m going inside,
lighting a candle, and sitting my happy ass next to the keg, right under the kitchen light. I’ll let you out
as soon as it comes on.” Carl descended the ladder, and the rhythmic thwacks of the ladder on the cabin
seemed to hammer Shane into a deeper and deeper darkness.
After the disbelief wore off, Shane panicked and sprang into action. He flipped on the flashlight
and whirled around, lunging toward where he thought the fuse box to be. He tore through webs, feeling
tiny bits of hard dried bugs sticking to his palms. He was only wearing a t-shirt, which he quickly
regretted. Ghastly gobs of silk web clung to his lips and he spat wildly. He scratched madly at his own
arms, trying to rip free of the frightful spools draped about his entire body. At last, he reached the fuse
box, and it was plastered with webbing. Its little door wasn’t entirely shut, and the webbing swarmed
up the front of the door and over to the wall. Shane was in a frantic state, almost out of his own body,
drunk with terror.
He seized the box as if it were the gateway back from hell, and swung the tiny door open, ripp-
ing the massive web. He then tried to focus his eyes on the panel of knobs and switches, sensing that
the end was in sight. Then the awful truth of the fuse box presented itself before Shane’s eye.
A moist, gray sac the size of a golf ball, stuck firmly in a basket of smoky cotton, and eight
jagged legs of shiny black arachnid.
Shane’s shriek turned to a coughing gasp of disbelief as the spider lunged at his eyes. He felt the
cold scrape of the spider’s legs on his cheeks and it paralyzed him. He collapsed in heap and squirmed
for a moment, unable to think straight. He felt an itchy pierce in his right eye and it immediately began
to swell. Then his eye began throbbing and Shane literally punched himself in the face. He could still
feel the spider on his forehead. He gathered a little sense and started screaming for Carl. He slapped at
his own forehead with both hands and began to stand. Shane swept mightily across his head with a
forearm and could no longer feel the spider. Stumbling hard into the fuse box, he wailed for Carl. His
cries turned from fearful to morbid. Shane put a crushing blow on that fuse box and its sharp metal cor-
ger dug into his shoulder. It hurt like hell. He hit it so hard that the light went on in the kitchen.
Carl looked up. He paused for a moment then smiled, chugging the contents of his red plastic
cup, and walked outside.
When he got to the side of the cabin, he could hear Shane screaming. He hurried up the ladder.

The rhythmic thwacks of the ladder beckoned Shane. His right eye was completely shut, and
from it a morsel of glistening maroon snaked over his cheekbone. He lumbered toward the doorway.
Blood flow was constricted, fingertips ached. The spider bite was working its morbid magic.
The thwacks got louder as Shane got closer to the door. The lock jingled on the door hinge. The old wooden square swung open and Carl saw Shane’s face three feet away from his own. Shane was flying through the air, arms outstretched and hands seeking a jugular.

“I hate you, Carl!”

The two plummeted ten feet to the soft earth with a deadly thud as Shane landed on Carl. It knocked the wind from his lungs, and Shane squeezed at Carl’s throat, trying to pop his ugly face right up off his neck. Carl’s face took on the complexion of a tomato. His eyes bulged; his body yearned painfully for air. Dying, he looked in shock at Shane’s bleeding, swollen eye, which was indeed horrifying, but it was Shane’s left eye that was the more unsettling of the two. Its gaze was tortured and thunderous and full of insane rage. The harrowing stare alone could have killed Carl by way of shock or heart attack, for all we know, but by this time he was all but dead anyway. For good measure, Shane clutched at the neck of the corpse until blood turned to thick sludge inside him, rendering him paralyzed for good. He collapsed to the ground next to a dead Carl.

Drawing short breaths, Shane’s entire head felt swollen. The spongy spider venom was nearly finished soaking the life from his veins. He wondered which exhale would be his last. Unable to move or scream, Shane heard the crunch of gravel under tires. A car was coming up the driveway. He closed his left eye and waited for his brother.