

Ramton Gallow Stories

The Trunk under the Stairs

By
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Hiding in the darkness of the basement, Jamie's heart pounded in his throat at what was about to happen. Ted was coming; it was now or never.

Six months ago everything had seemed fine. Jamie's mother, Lydia had met the first person to make her happy since her husband died four years ago, when Jamie was just eight. Ted was great back then. He was friendly, took Jamie and his mother on trips out as a family, bought them both things, and there were many cosy nights in. It was great.

It was when Ted and Lydia said 'I do' that everything seemed to change. Within weeks his temper would flare up at Lydia over the slightest things, shouting at her that it was all her fault, and sometimes even striking her. He would apologise afterwards of course, say it was the pressure of work, but after Ted lost his job a month later things got even worse.

One night, after being out all day having numerous job interviews, but still not getting anywhere, Ted had reached melting point; and when he took a dislike to what Lydia had cooked him for his dinner, he threw the plate across the dining room, and struck Lydia with the back of his hand.

As Ted stormed out of the house, slamming the front so hard it made the window rattle, Jamie, who had been in his bedroom when the commotion took place, went to comfort his crying mother as she tried to hide the bruise on her cheek. She made excuses for Ted, blaming lack of money and Ted's difficulty getting another job for his reaction, but Jamie knew that there was no excuse for what Ted was doing.

Jamie heard Ted return at about one o'clock in the morning. Watching from the top of the landing, Jamie saw his drunken stepfather fall unconscious on the sofa. He could feel the anger well up inside him. He wanted Ted out of his and his mother's life, and when he went back to his bedroom, and looking out at the star-filled

night's sky, Jamie wished that soon he'd find a way to make that happen.

It was the next morning that a letter came that would change everything. It was a job offer for Ted in a town that he had never heard of before, Ramton Gallow, and the company was not one of those that Ted had applied to for a job, let alone had an interview with.

On calling the phone number to confirm everything was correct, Ted was more than happy to take them up on their offer. They would have a house in Ramton Gallow, which would be theirs for as long as they wanted it and completely rent free, a company car, and more money than Ted had ever earned before. The only catch was that Ted had to start at the beginning of next week.

As the days went by before their departure, there was still a tension in the house from Ted. He snapped at the slightest thing, and though he didn't raise his hand to either Jamie or his mother, Jamie could see that Ted wanted to.

On Friday, Jamie said goodbye to his friends and the house he had grown up in, and as they pulled out of the driveway, his mother whispered to him that they were going to put the bad things that had happened recently behind them, but Jamie wasn't convinced.

On reaching their new house in Ramton Gallow things went downhill even more. Though they hadn't had to take much with them, as the house was fully furnished for their needs, all their clothes, books and other items of value to them that they brought had to be packed away. This all took time, and with the five hour drive they had made, Ted was not in the best mood as night came, and at eight o'clock when there was a knock at the front door, he looked as if he would like to rip the visitor's head off as he went to answer it.

'Hello, you must be Ted Davis,' said the man at the door, cheerily, though his face fell slightly at seeing the seething anger in Ted's eyes. 'I'm Mr Amos Clarke, your new boss.'

At these words Ted's demeanour changed.

'Hello,' he said, 'I'm sorry. It's been a hectic day.'

'Oh yes, I can understand that,' said Mr Clarke. 'I just wanted to check you've settled in all right, and to tell you that your company car will be delivered tomorrow.'

'Thank you,' replied Ted. 'Would you like to come in?'

Mr Clarke nodded and entered the house. He was a plump, little man, with reseeding black hair and a pencil moustache.

‘I hope you’ve found everything to your liking,’ said Mr Clarke.

‘Yes, it is a nice little house, though it’ll probably take a few days to get used to.’

‘Umm,’ Mr Clarke nodded in agreement. ‘Just one thing, I know you have a child, may I ask how old he or she is?’

‘Jamie? He’s twelve, nearly thirteen.’

‘Good.’

‘Why is that good?’ asked Lydia, who had just entered the hallway from the living room, followed closely by Jamie.

‘Oh, it’s just that there have been a few accidents over the years with young children going into the basement. There’s no light down there you see, and they have fallen down the stairs, and bumped into things in the dark. But I’m sure a boy who is almost thirteen will be careful enough.’

‘What basement?’ asked Lydia.

‘Have you not found it?’ asked Mr Clarke, surprised. ‘The door to it is just there next to you, under the stairs.’

Mr Clarke went over to the part of the stairs opposite the living room, and opened the basement door, which had blended in to the rest of the stairs so much that if you didn’t know it was there you almost wouldn’t notice it. Lydia and Ted, however, were still surprised that they hadn’t spotted it before now.

As they looked down into the basement they noticed that the light from the hallway only shone on the first five steps, beyond that was a blanket of darkness.

‘I doubt there’s anything down there,’ said Mr Clarke, ‘but if you do go investigating I’d recommend you take a good torch with you.’

Ted and Lydia thought that was obvious and it didn’t need saying, but Jamie noticed that Mr Clarke wasn’t looking at his parents when he spoke; he was looking straight at him.

Once Mr Clarke had said his goodbyes and left, Ted went back over to the basement door, slammed it shut, and looking at Jamie, told him never to go down into the basement, or else.

Jamie knew what ‘or else’ meant, but he was determined to go down there the first chance he got.

That chance was a few days later. With Ted at work, and his mother out shopping, Jamie decided now was the best time to explore the basement.

The day before, Jamie had found a torch in one of the boxes they had brought with them to the house, and on remembering Mr Clarke's words, he had hid it under his bed ready for this moment.

The batteries had nearly run out, and the beam wasn't as strong as he would have liked it to be, but nothing was going to deter Jamie from seeing what was down there, not even the door bolt that Ted had bought the day after Mr Clarke had visited, and attached across the basement door was going to stop him.

Jamie moved the bolt across without a second thought, opened the door under the stairs and peered down into the darkness of the basement. Turning the torch on, Jamie shone the weak light on each step, and then finally onto the basement floor.

He knew he shouldn't go down there, Ted had told him not to, and Jamie knew what happened if Ted didn't get his way.

Ted wouldn't know though. Nobody would be home for ages yet, and as he was only going to go down there for a minute, just to have a quick check around, no harm would come to him.

Determined to do it, Jamie began to walk down the stairs into the basement. Each step creaked under his feet, as if to warn him to go back, but Jamie took no notice.

On reaching the bottom of the stairs, Jamie moved the light of the torch around the room. The dust that filled the air danced in the light, and Jamie wondered how long it had been since anyone had been down there.

It was pretty much empty, except for a few rusted empty paint tins that sat on top of a dusty sheet in one corner of the room, a few cardboard boxes in another, and the shelves that sat on three of the four walls.

It was the boxes that drew Jamie's interest. He gathered that they must have been left by the previous owners of the house, and wondered what treasures dwelt inside.

Carefully opening the first box, disturbing the dust which sat on top, making it billow as it fell to the floor, Jamie shone his torch inside. It was filled about a third of the way up with very old newspapers. They were the all editions of the same local newspaper, the Ramton Gallow Standard, and as Jamie took the top

few out he could see from the date that they were a good fifty years old.

As he wondered why anyone would keep newspapers from such a long time ago and then just store them in a cardboard box in a basement, the rest of the newspapers in the box jumped slightly.

For a second Jamie would have sworn he was seeing things, but as he paused with his hand hovering over the papers, they jumped again, no more than an inch, but they definitely moved.

Before Jamie could take another breath all the papers began to move, as if whatever was under them was rising to the surface. Mesmerized by the movement, Jamie stood transfixed regardless of his mind telling him to run.

Faster and faster the movement became, making the box as a whole start to shake, until without warning it suddenly stopped.

Jamie waited for a second, and when nothing happened, he slowly put his hand back inside the box. Taking hold of the newspaper on top, he moved it across slightly and then took it out.

As he did so the rat that had been hiding underneath jumped out at Jamie.

Jamie shrieked louder and higher than he ever had before. He was angry with himself. He wasn't normally afraid of rats, spiders or anything that would have made his mother cower in fear, but it had startled him, and he was glad no one was around to hear his cry.

Catching his breath, Jamie moved the torchlight around the floor, looking for where the rat had got to.

'There you are,' said Jamie as he spotted the creature cowering in the corner.

As Jamie began to approach it, the rat squeaked and darted along the edge of the wall until it came to a shelf that was off its bracket and leaning against a lower shelf like a ramp. The rat ran up the slope almost too fast for Jamie to keep the torchlight on it.

Jamie suddenly noticed something he had missed when he had first looked around the basement. Now his torchlight was glinting off the metal brackets he could see the large leather trunk that was sitting under the stairs. It was brown and old, with some of the leather in the corners completely worn away.

It was then that the rat decided to get off the shelf so it jumped towards the trunk. Expecting the rat to land on top of the trunk and then probably run down behind it, Jamie wasn't prepared for the lid

to fly open as the rat was in midair and expose the jagged white teeth and salivating mouth that was inside.

The rat didn't even have time to squeak as the lid snapped shut with a crunch.

Jamie stood there frozen. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. It must have been a trick his eyes were playing on him.

Knowing that he must make sure of what he saw, Jamie took the shelf that the rat had run up and cautiously walked towards the side of the stairs.

This close the trunk looked a lot more battered and old, and the air around it smelt rotten, like meat that had gone slightly off. Using the end of the shelf to lift the lid, Jamie was ready to jump back as he exposed the mouth, or whatever it was, but as the lid opened all he saw was the dark, empty interior of the trunk.

Carefully, Jamie reached his hand inside. Holding his breath he waited for something to happen, but nothing did, and as he felt the cold wooden bottom of the trunk, he withdrew his hand, slammed the lid shut and went back up the stairs.

For days afterwards Jamie wondered if he had imagined it. He didn't have anyone to talk to about what had happened because as school had not started yet he had only met a few other children his age at the local park, and didn't know them well enough to start talking about a monster leather trunk that lived in his basement for fear of being ridiculed.

The next time he was alone in the house, when Ted was working late, and his mother had gone over to the next door neighbour's house to catch up on some gossip, Jamie snuck into the basement again.

The trunk was just as he had left it that first time, battered and old, and still smelling slightly of death. Again he carefully opened the lid of the trunk with a piece of wood, and again he found it empty.

He wondered for a second what would happen if he put something into the trunk while it was empty. Leaving the lid up, Jamie went over to the boxes and took out one of the newspapers, crumpled it up into a ball, and threw into the trunk. As the balled up newspaper disappeared inside, the lid snapped shut. After a few seconds a chewing sound began coming from inside the trunk, and

then suddenly the lid opened, revealing the mouth, and spat out the chewed up ball, causing it to splat against the wall.

The trunk fell silent again, the lid closed.

Jamie went over to the newspaper still stuck on the wall. It was covered in a foul smelling green liquid, which Jamie wisely decided not to touch.

As he left the basement Jamie had an idea; if he could lure Ted down into the basement maybe the trunk would eat him.

Jamie felt a chill come over his body as he realised what he was thinking. Could he kill someone, even someone like Ted, who had terrorised him and his mother for the past few months? Ted deserved it, didn't he? Jamie was convinced that Ted did. On his own Jamie was not able to defend himself or his mother, he needed something to gain the advantage, and the trunk was his best option.

It was only a few short hours before Jamie found his opportunity to get Ted into the basement.

His stepfather had come home from work in a bad mood and somewhat drunk. The smell of alcohol lingered on Ted like an aura, and Jamie wasn't surprised when Ted began shouting at Lydia because he couldn't find the remote control for the television.

The tension escalated sharply, and before Lydia could even register what was happening, Ted grabbed hold of her.

Jamie didn't wait to see what Ted was going to do to his mother, but instead he rushed into the living room and launched himself at Ted, pushing the man onto the sofa, and ran for the door to the basement and quickly unbolted it.

Going down the stairs into the darkness, Jamie didn't care that he hadn't got the torch with him. He'd been down here enough times to know where everything was, so he reached out, and once he found the boxes right where he knew they'd be, he ducked behind them and waited.

Ted got to the top of the basement stairs and paused for a second. His courage was wavering slightly about going down into the unknown basement, but with the drink and his anger clouding his judgement, he wasn't going to let a little brat like Jamie get away with pushing him over.

Jamie listened as the thump of Ted's feet on the wooden stairs grew louder. Peering from behind the cardboard boxes, he saw Ted's silhouette slithering along the floor towards him, as the only

light in the basement was coming from the open door at the top of the stairs.

‘Come here, Jamie,’ crowed Ted as he stood about halfway down the stairs. ‘It’ll be better for you to come out of the basement yourself than have me come down there and find you.’

With his hand shaking, Jamie picked up a piece of brick about the size of a two-penny piece that lay by the wall, held to tight in his hand and bracing himself for what he was about to do. Taking a few deep breathes, and then counting to three under his breath, he leaned out from behind the boxes, but still keeping himself in the darkness, and threw the piece of brick at the trunk, hitting the side of it.

Ducking back behind the boxes, Jamie prayed that his plan would work as Ted reached the bottom of the stairs.

‘One last chance, Jamie,’ said Ted, ‘come out from under those stairs. It’ll be better for you.’

Ted’s footsteps echoed as he walked across the basement floor towards where the trunk sat.

Peering over the top of the boxes, Jamie watched as Ted reached out for the lid of the trunk.

‘Are you in here, Jamie? Thought you’d found yourself a good hiding place? There’s nowhere to go now, my lad. I’m going to make you wish you’d stayed on the right side of me.’

Jamie willed as hard as he could for the mouth to be there, to eat his stepfather and bring about the end to his and his mother’s nightmare, but as Ted lifted the lid, Jamie’s hopes were dashed as the trunk’s insides looked their normal self.

Slamming the lid shut, Ted moved the trunk out to get a look behind it, thinking that Jamie was there.

Knowing that this was going to be his only chance to escape, Jamie darted from his hiding place as fast as he could.

He only managed to get his foot on the third stair up before Ted’s hand gripped Jamie’s ankle, and he fell jaw first on the wood.

Tasting the blood from his now split lip Jamie tried to get back up, but was instead dragged down to the basement floor by his stepfather.

As Ted held him up by the scruff of the neck, Jamie could see the anger in Ted’s eyes as the man stretched his arm back ready to slap the young boy across the face.

Without thinking Jamie kicked out, hitting his stepfather squarely between the legs. As the man doubled over, Jamie pushed him back with all his might towards where the trunk now sat.

As they got to within a step away from it, the lid of the trunk flew open, and the guttural growl that it gave made Ted scream with terror as his body fell back onto the salivating tongue.

Jamie just managed to fall to the floor as the lid snapped shut across Ted's waist, the teeth digging into his flesh, spraying blood over the walls and floor.

The lid opened again, and with a flick of its tongue, the trunk devoured the rest of Ted.

Jamie sat on the floor for what seemed like forever, transfixed by what had just happened and the knowledge that he and his mother were now safe. His trance-like state was only broken by the sound of his name echoing above him.

'Jamie? What happened?'

Jamie looked up at his mother's face as it peered from the top of the stairs. Smiling, he managed to get to his feet and shakily run to her.

'It's ok now,' said Jamie as he embraced his mother.

Together they left the basement, shut the door, drew the bolt across the top and never opened it again.

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