

The Damp Place

by Sheila Luecht

The rusty knob had not been turned in a long time. Behind the heavy, hewn, wood door, a set of stairs led to the basement. A collection of household items were haplessly arranged around the cement floor. Square pane windows let in the only light, in spite of a dirty film on each. While the air seemed damp and cold, there was an old coal furnace in the corner. It did not seem to be working.

A brightness did dance in this place though, and certainly the laughs of children were stored in the Christmas ornament boxes. The lights there that are quite unique now were commonplace back in the forties, those crazy bubble lights, or was that the fifties? Tinsel and garland slinked around in old tissue paper, there were plastic poinsettias and old wreaths tucked inside aged boxes. It was an organized bit of chaos.

In one corner old stacks of dishes and tricycles, ironically shared their own bit of concrete. An ancient ironing board, a wringer washer, and an old mangle worked hard to stand in a spot that might be considered a use-able space, if someone actually wanted to use them again. The richness of this place was in the soft milky eyes of the elderly beholder.

There would be a time when this stuff would be just some garbage, and need to be hauled out. Why not get the jump on it and think of retiring it all to some second hand store, some junkyard or fancy antique shop?

As long as he could still take the stairs, he would go down there to be with the memories that each piece held. He knew that their time was about up, because his was too. His wife had already gone, and even before that she had long stopped using the washer and fancy mangle. Those were left over from long ago, when they were first married and each sheet had to be pressed so nice.

That dang old furnace did not matter to anyone. The coal stopped being dumped a long time ago too. The next thing was oil, and then it was supposed to be gas.

He wondered about that dang furnace. He kept trying to get it fixed up before the harsh weather made its return. The fall seemed longer this year. He needed to make sure those down spouts got cleared out too. First the cold rain, then the snow, sometimes it all iced up, then it messed up the stoop.

Everyday he thought of those old decorations, the rags and stuff in the basement. He took that little trip down the steps and nothing ever seemed to get done. Day after day, he would hold onto that old wood banister, grabbing with his left hand and using his cane with the right. Don't know how many stairs, but everyday, it came to be a bit of a harder descent, and a harder climb back up. He almost seemed to forget the climb back up.

Once he thought he heard something upstairs. Why, it sounded like a dog, its nails racing across the wood floor in the hall! How could that be; Martha never would allow a dog in the house, and well, neither had he. Before long there were other noises that did not seem familiar. Then it was another day of going down and visiting his stuff and trying to figure out what to do with it.

Then he was sure he heard footsteps. He tried to get up the stairs quick to see, but he just never made it or at least he forgot if he did or not.

The basement was all cleared out one day and still he kept going down there. He still saw the old mangle, the boxes of ornaments, the rags, the wringer washer and all the buckets and mops, just where they once stood. The furnace still didn't seem to work, but he noticed someone had cleaned the windows for him. Could be those nice neighbors next door. Then one day he just stopped coming down.

He realized that someone was waiting for him and he could just see her outline in the bright light, well, he would recognize those gams anywhere.

“Martha! You've come for me at last!”

“Why George, I have been waiting for you! I didn't mean you really had to clean out the basement first!”

