

Smoke

She smelled smoke. Burning wood mixed with something nasty she couldn't identify. Amanda rolled over and kept perfectly still, her eyes tightly closed. The smell didn't go away. She peeked at the clock. Three-o-eight. She groaned and paced down the hall to the bathroom. There was no smell in there.

Four minutes later her bedroom was clear and she snuggled back under the sheet. Just on the edge of sleep, she smelled it again, stronger this time. As she inhaled, the odor settled into her lungs. Her body rebelled, balking at each breath as she tried not to cough against the acrid burning in her throat. She buried her face in the pillow. At last, it all faded away and she fell asleep.

The next morning, she considered what to do as she drank her coffee. At least it was Saturday and she didn't have to go to the office. She really needed to figure this out before it drove her crazy. This was the third time she had woken to the smell of smoke.

The first time was a month ago. Waking up at one-thirty to the smell of something burning, she ran outside and called 9-1-1. That was quite a spectacle. Two fire trucks, a rescue and three police cars had come shrieking up to her house with horns and sirens screaming. All the neighbors turned out to watch as Amanda stood quivering in the street, expecting to see flames punching through the windows and roof. They found nothing. Not one sniff of a smoldering wire or a shorted electrical outlet. Nothing. She was embarrassed, even though the lieutenant told her they got calls like that all the time and she did the right thing.

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The second time was ten days ago. She had just gone to bed when it started. She hadn't time to fall deeply asleep, so it was definitely not a dream. It was exactly the same, burning wood mixed with that horrid something else. She was reluctant to call the fire department, so she searched the entire house looking for the source. It was only in her bedroom, faint or non-existent everywhere else. She poked into every corner and checked every plug. She felt every wall to make sure they weren't hot.

The smell didn't go away. She decided to call the fire department and tell them about it. She described the smell and told the dispatcher she couldn't find anything burning. He sent out one firefighter to investigate. When he arrived, he went to her bedroom first. Of course, by that time, the smell was gone. He inspected all the places she had, and checked the basement and the vents. He probed every cupboard and cabinet. There wasn't one part of the house he missed. He found nothing. She apologized and felt foolish. He told her not to worry, it happened all the time and she should never hesitate to call if she felt unsafe.

Unsafe was the word that stuck. Did the smell make her feel she was in danger? She didn't really know. Yes, she panicked at the sensation of breathing in the smoky scent, but did she really believe her house was on fire? After this third time, she still didn't know. She hadn't called the fire department last night but considered whether she should notify them about this latest incident. She wouldn't ask them to do anything, just put it on the record. She dialed before she could change her mind.

"Auburn Fire Department. Your call is being recorded. How can I help you?" The dispatcher sounded stern.

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“Yes, this is Amanda Ellington,” she said in her most serious voice. “I live at 5568 Birchcrest Circle.”

“Do you have a problem?” the dispatcher asked when she hesitated.

“I’ve made two reports of smelling smoke in my house over the past month,” she explained. “Somebody from your department came here both times and didn’t find anything burning. I just wanted to put it on the record that I smelled smoke again last night.”

“Did you search your house for the source?” the dispatcher asked, now sounding annoyed.

“Yes, but there was nothing,” she told him.

“I’ll make a note in the computer log linked to your address.” The dispatcher sighed. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, that’s all,” she said. “I just wanted it on record. Thank you.”

She was intimidated by the dispatcher’s demeanor, but the lieutenant said they got calls like this all the time. They had to maintain a neutral attitude, she told herself, or they’d be going out on unnecessary calls all the time. At least it was on the record without another embarrassing visit.

Starting that night, she walked every inch of the house before going to bed. She sniffed every room and peered in all the corners. She felt the walls near each outlet for warm spots. She opened the closets and cupboards. After a week, there was nothing more. She wondered if she was becoming obsessed. She told herself she would continue for a month and stop if there were no further episodes.

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It didn't happen as she hoped. On Sunday night, the night after she made that vow and eight days after the last incident, she woke to the smell of smoke in her room. But it wasn't only the smell this time. She could see the smoke as it surged through the air, as if blown through a bellows. Swirling around her, it caught in her nose and throat. She couldn't help but breathe it in. She coughed. She gulped air which only forced more smoke into her lungs. She snorted, choking on the caustic fumes.

Stumbling onto the floor as she untangled herself from the sheets, she scabbled to the door. The knob was surprisingly cool. She flung herself into the hallway only to discover that it too was filled with smoky clouds. Still coughing, she crawled along the floor as they had taught her in grammar school. It didn't help. The smoke was just as thick there. She looked up to get her bearings and saw a silhouette moving ahead of her, a tall shadow gliding through the smoke. She tried to call out, but didn't have enough breath. She made one last burst through the nearest door into the back of the pantry.

The air was clear there, or at least it was until she opened the door. Slamming it shut, she landed sprawling on the floor beneath the shelves of jars and boxes. She sucked up big breaths, working to expel the smoke from her lungs. She was spent and any rational thought was beyond her energy level. Eventually, she reached out for one of the shelves and pulled herself to a sitting position.

I need to call the fire department, she thought.

She could only believe it was real this time; the smoke certainly was. But her phone was in the bedroom on the nightstand. She didn't have the strength to fight her way through the smoke there and back again. Not sure what to do, she stood up and walked through the archway leading

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from the pantry into the kitchen. The air was clear there too. Strange, since the kitchen was open to the hallway which had been dense with smoke just a few minutes ago. She looked into the hall and was amazed to see that it was clear. No smoke, nothing. Her throat was raw and burnt and the inside of her mouth tasted foul. No, she hadn't imagined it. She remembered the door knob and the figure in the smoke. She was confused and very scared.

The bedroom door was flat against the wall. She gawked through the doorway. There was no smoke, not even a trace of the burning smell. It was like nothing had happened. Shaking her head in disbelief, she went back to the kitchen to get a cold bottle of water to soothe her throat. As she reached for the refrigerator handle, she noticed the fluorescent orange square of paper posted on the door. It hadn't been there a few minutes ago. She was sure she would have noticed it against the white background.

Have you figured it out yet, Amanda? Soon. ♥ Todd

She shook her head, baffled. Todd? She couldn't grasp the notion that someone was doing this to her deliberately, least of all Todd. She dashed into the hall, weaving in and out of the three doorways, to her bedroom, the office and the basement.

"Todd, are you in here?" yelling as loud as her sore throat allowed. "Todd, this isn't funny. Come out here right now. Answer me, damn it!"

No response. By now, all the lights were on. Half way down the basement stairs, she looked over the railing on both sides. It was empty except for the washer and dryer and a few boxes. Back in the kitchen she collapsed at the table. There was nobody in the house but her. There was no fire and the smoke was gone. She crumpled up the note and hurled it across the room.

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Was Todd really behind all this? She hadn't been in touch with him in over three years, since she had ended their relationship. Before she broke it off, she introduced him to an old classmate from college they had run into at the local bar. The last she had heard from him they were moving in together. She had no idea why he would be taunting her this way. There was no way she could sleep after all this, so she left a message with the office that she was going to work at home. She still had Todd's number on her phone, and she got his voice mail.

Todd, it's Amanda. What's going on? I don't appreciate these tricks. If you wanted to scare me, you succeeded. I'd like an explanation. Call me.

She wanted to take a shower but she was afraid. The clock said four-ten. She made tea, hoping that would soothe her nerves. It didn't. She kept picking up the phone, willing a response from Todd. There wasn't one. She toured the house again, every corner, every opening, the back of every shelf. She ransacked her bedroom, pulling everything out of the closet and drawers. She moved all the furniture. She crawled on her hands and knees and felt every inch of the floor. There was nothing. She wasn't sure what she was hoping to find, a smoke machine maybe or the opening of a pipe crammed against a hole. Anything. Finally she threw herself on the bed and beat her fists on the mattress, wailing in frustration. The tinkle of her phone announcing a voice mail jolted her upright.

Hello, Amanda. I guess I have your attention now. Trust me, this is no trick. What you did to me – that was a trick, a mean and cruel trick. I loved you, Amanda, but instead you foisted me off on that lunatic friend of yours. She's made my life pure hell for the past three years. You're going to pay for that, Amanda. Both of you are going to pay for it.

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She threw the phone on the bed. It didn't make any sense. All she had done was introduce them. She only knew that woman from the few classes they had together, they weren't even really friends. She tried calling Todd's number. No answer. She left a message for him to call her back.

She was so tired. Afraid to go back in the bedroom, she settled on the living room sofa and promptly fell asleep. It was past two in the afternoon when she woke. She checked her phone, but there were no calls or messages. She was hungry. Since her throat still felt raw, she got the ice cream from the freezer and scooped out a big bowlful. Sitting on the couch to eat, she flipped on the television. The all-day local news channel was on. There were the usual feel-good stories and community announcements. She was just about to shut it off when the headline for the next story caught her attention. AUBURN WOMAN MISSING, POLICE ASKING FOR HELP.

"A local woman is missing and police have no leads," the news anchor began as a photo of the woman came up on the screen.

"Nooo!" Amanda practically screamed as she jumped up.

"Jennifer Ferraro, a 29 year old Auburn woman, has been missing since Friday," the newswoman continued. "Her live-in boyfriend, Todd Lachman, reported that Ferraro failed to come home Friday night after they argued earlier in the day. Lachman was unable to provide any additional details regarding Ferraro's disappearance or where she might have gone. No evidence of foul play has been found and there are no leads as to her whereabouts at the present time. Police are asking that anyone with information about Miss Ferraro or her current location contact the Auburn Police Department."

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Amanda stared at the screen in disbelief. The thought of Todd's message made her shiver, but she had a hard time connecting him to Jennifer's disappearance. He had always been calm and considerate, too much so as far as she had been concerned. It used to make her livid that he never showed any emotion, didn't get upset and never disagreed with her. How could he have changed so much? But, it couldn't be a coincidence that Jennifer was missing and he had threatened both of them.

She searched for the business number of the police department on her phone. She tapped the call button but immediately had second thoughts. She hit cancel and threw the phone down on the coffee table. She had to think about what she was going to tell them. She really didn't have any tangible information, only one voice message. She needed to find something that proved Todd was involved.

"The bedroom," Amanda exclaimed. "There has to be something in the bedroom."

She headed down the hall. The door to her room was closed which drew her up short. She knew it had been wide open when she was in there earlier and she didn't remember closing it. She put her ear up against the wood but didn't hear anything from the other side. Her hand was shaking as she reached for the knob and eased the door open slowly. She craned her neck to peek inside.

Suddenly, the door was yanked away from her. She was shoved from behind into the room. She fell hard on her right shoulder and hip and the side of her head smashed against the floor. The door slammed shut. She tried to raise her head and a scalding bolt shot across her temple. Groaning, she carefully laid her head back on the floor. Her shoulder and hip were throbbing. Forcing herself to be still, Amanda tried to focus on the room instead of the pain. Instantly, a

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distinctly putrid odor accosted her. That was it, the other smell that had been mixed with the smell of smoke. It was horrid and she coughed involuntarily, causing her head to bounce off the floor.

“Yow!” she yelled out. She couldn’t help it; the pain was excruciating.

She tried cupping her palm over her nose and mouth to keep out the smell. It helped a little, but she still wanted to gag. She rolled over on her back, careful not to jiggle her head too much. It didn’t help the smell but it did ease the pain in her hip and shoulder. She was lying at the foot of her bed. From what she could see, there wasn’t anything out of place in the room. One corner of the knitted afghan she kept on her bed was hanging off the end. Thinking it might make a good filter wrapped across her face, she reached up with her free hand and tugged. It didn’t budge. She tried again with no luck.

The pain in her head had eased a bit, and identifying the noxious odor was far more compelling. She grabbed hold of the footboard and pulled herself up. Rising to her feet, she looked at the bed. With her hand clasped tight over her mouth, Amanda’s scream came out a muffled bleat.

It took five full seconds for the scene to fully register on her brain. Jennifer was lying on the bed, anchoring the afghan which had been tossed across the spread. Her face was almost unrecognizable. Amanda would have known she was dead from the smell alone. The skin was bloodlessly white and shiny, stretched taut over the grotesquely bloated body. Pinkish foam flecked with strands of rusty red leaked from her mouth and nose, caked on her chin and the lower half of her left cheek. Amanda gagged and tried to keep herself from vomiting as she

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turned away from the body. She ran to the door but it was stuck and no amount of shaking or banging made it move even slightly.

“Todd!” She yelled as loud as she could. “Let me out of here! Right now!”

Her leg jerked as something lightly brushed her ankle, like a tiny bug crawling across her skin. Looking down, she saw soft tendrils of smoke drifting near the floor. Then she smelled it, that odor of burning wood mixed with the stench of rotting flesh. That’s what the smell in her room had been all along, a preview of what was to come. She looked across the room and the curls of smoke had given way to puffs floating out from beneath the bed.

Her panic was rising, competing with the nauseating odor and revulsion at the gruesome spectacle on her bed. She was waist deep in smoke now as the smell grew stronger. Then she heard the low crackling. A few seconds later, she heard it again, louder. The smoke was getting thicker too. Her eyes were starting to burn but the drifting threads weren’t thick enough yet to obscure her vision. Turning toward the bed, she saw an orangey tongue poke out from underneath and then withdraw, only to be replaced by another a few inches away and then another. The floor under the bed was on fire. Flames were flicking now and the smoke was getting thicker. She ran to the window, but it wouldn’t open. She threw the lamp against it but it bounced off and shattered on the floor. Back at the door, she banged and yelled as loud as she could.

“Todd, please!” she begged. “Let me out. I’m sorry if I did anything to hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I promise I won’t say a word to anybody.”

There was no response. She pounded harder.

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“Todd!” crying and screaming at the same time. “Todd, please open the door. Please! Please!”

She slid to the floor. Tears streamed from her reddened eyes. Flames were dancing around the sides of the bed. She was going to die, burned alive. She wondered how Todd had killed Jennifer. It didn't really matter. They were both going to be burned to a crisp.

“Hello, Amanda,” said the voice from the other side of the door. “Are you having fun yet?”

“Todd!” she sobbed and jumped up. “Todd, let me out, please!”

She heard scratching noises and the door suddenly flew open. Todd was casually leaning against the wall in front of her. She stood in the open doorway with her mouth hanging open. He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the hall. She stumbled and hit the wall hard. Regaining her balance, she was met with a menacing glare. Instead of the passive expression she remembered, his whole face was twisted in a scowl. There was a raw scar the length of one cheek. His hair was cut in a spiky mish-mash and his clothes were dark and disheveled. She started to speak, but he cut her off.

“Shut up, Amanda!” he barked at her. “Shut up and listen. See what you've done to me? That psycho bitch ruined my life. Thanks to you.”

“I didn't do anything, Todd,” she whimpered. “It's not my fault.”

“Shut up, I said!” He screeched at Amanda. he yanked her phone out of his pocket and thrust it at her. “You'd better call 9-1-1. Oh, sorry, they'll probably think it's another one of your crank

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calls. Let's hope they decide to show up. By the way, I took the liberty of deleting all my messages and contact info."

He ducked into the bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Amanda just stood there, dazed. Noises and banging from behind the door roused her back to her senses. She turned on her phone and punched in the emergency number.

"Auburn Fire Department. Your call is being recorded. How can I help you?" It sounded like the same dispatcher.

"This is Amanda Ellington," she stammered into the phone, "5568 Birchcrest Circle. My house is on fire. Please send help."

"Ms. Ellington, are you sure you have a fire?" the dispatcher asked with obvious annoyance. "I see here you've made several similar calls over the past few weeks."

"Yes, please believe me," she begged. "My bedroom is on fire."

"Did you actually see flames?"

"Yes, yes! There were flames under my bed. Please, hurry!" She pleaded frantically.

"All right," the dispatcher sighed. "Help will be there in a few minutes. Please leave the house immediately and walk outside. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I'll go outside right now." She headed for the front door. "Thank you. Thank you."

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She looked back at the house when she got across the street. *Oh my God, Todd's still in there!* She didn't know what to do. Her feet could have been encased in cement. She couldn't get herself to move. Finally, she heard sirens in the distance.

"Thank God," she murmured. "Everything's going to be all right."

She paced while the fire fighters were inside the house, alternately hugging herself and wringing her hands. Two police officers were leaning against one of the cruisers and three paramedics were talking quietly together near the rescue truck. The neighbors had been out in force earlier, but now there was only a small huddle left in the driveway two houses down. They had thrown a few glances her way and snickered among themselves, but not one of them had come over to her. She didn't understand what was taking so long. They hadn't even taken the hoses off the truck yet. They must have found the fire in her room by now.

Twenty minutes later one of the fire fighters came out and went directly to the police officers. He spoke with them for several minutes. In the meantime the rest of them exited the house and began taking their gear off and stowing it back in the truck. Amanda wasn't sure what she should do. She started to walk toward the fire truck.

"Please stay back, Miss," one of the men said to her. "Someone will be over to speak to you shortly."

She stopped short in the middle of the road. Nervously, she chewed off the tip of one fingernail and was starting on another when she saw the two policemen start toward her. Her gut instinct was to run but she hadn't done anything wrong.

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“Miss Ellington, I’m Officer Williams,” the taller of the two addressed her, “and this is Officer Mazzaro. I’m afraid we have a big problem here.”

“I don’t understand,” her voice quivering. “Did they put the fire out?”

“Miss Ellington, you know there was no fire.” Officer Mazzaro reached behind him as he spoke and brought out a pair of handcuffs. “Amanda Ellington, you are under arrest for maliciously reporting a false fire alarm and creating a hazard. You have the right to remain silent...”

The officer’s voice buzzed in her ear but her brain couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Were they really going to arrest her because she reported a fire they couldn’t find? But, there had been a fire and smoke and...

“A dead body!” she cried out. “What about the dead body on my bed?”

The two officers looked at her, simultaneously halting what they were doing.

“Miss Ellington, there was no body on your bed,” Officer Williams said sharply. “There was nothing in your house except what should be there. No body, no fire, no smoke. Please don’t make this harder on yourself than necessary.”

She was dumbstruck. Mazzaro gently pulled her arms behind her back and snapped the cuffs on her wrists. Williams held up his hand to stop a large pick-up truck that was approaching as his partner escorted Amanda across the street. She looked up at the truck as it slowly rolled by. It was one of those big work trucks with a stainless steel tool box across the back, a tool box as big as a coffin. There was a small generator in the bed and several storage cases. Todd was at the

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wheel. He saluted the two officers and then looked directly at Amanda, blowing her a kiss as Officer Mazzaro stuffed her in the back seat of the cruiser.