

Furnace
This Old Weird House
by Clayton Emery

Okay. I've got gaping holes in my house, I have to buy the neighbors a new dog, the FAA and FBI have cordoned off the neighborhood, television crews have blocked the road, my wife is screaming and -- the last straw -- the noise woke the kids.

It's my own fault. I broke Homeowner's Rule #1.

Leave well-enough alone.

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It all started because we weren't burning much heating oil.

None, in fact.

Now you expect a few quirks in an old house. And this house was older than most. So old that not even the Hysterical Society knows when it was built. And of course, with an old house, you expect to make a few repairs. (Same as a new one.) Owning a house is actually a race to see if you or the mortgage dies first, and before the sills collapse, the roof falls in, the water main implodes, etc.

Except we were saving money in one tiny spot, which was, we weren't burning any heating oil. Not a drop. In a winter when people wondered whether to sell the children or simply sign the deed over to the oil company. According to my neighbors, I saved so much money I could stuff it in the walls of the guest bedroom instead of insulation, which amounts to the same thing.

Now I'll say right off, I am not an old house fan. My ideal house would come shrinkwrapped with a pair of scissors and a green concrete lawn. But my wife's family hails from so far back they sneer at the DAR as if they were the homeless, so The Doll fell in love with this heap right away. I've been married long enough to say, "Yes, dear," right away to save time. Besides, this was my chance to show up my two-condos-one-in-Florida-one-in-Virginia father-in-law. So I bought this house and one each of Sears'

Craftsmen tools (they really do replace 'em if you break 'em, although I'm testing the limit), and I became Mr Fixit.

And it's fun, in a way, if your idea of joy is digging a mouse nest out of a live electrical socket on a wet wall while holding a flashlight in your mouth so the spiders have an even chance to explore your teeth. Then driving to the hardware store where all the folks know your first name, and enjoy a good laugh at your questions.

But weird things happen in old houses.

Like three months into this icy winter, we had yet to buy a gallon of heating oil. I knew I had oil heat, because it said so on the Real Estate Purchase & Sales Agreement, so presumably there was a furnace in the cellar that burned oil. I could see outside, in back of the tiger lilies under a few leaves (okay, a *lot* of leaves) that I had an oil intake. And blue-and-orange oil trucks were thicker in my neighborhood than yellow school buses. The Doll, who handles the money, asked, Everyone else needs oil, honeybunch, so why not us? Could I maybe Do Something About It?

I'll admit I was curious too, and thought, *I'll just take a quick look.* Which hurts less, initially, than shooting yourself in the foot with a revolver.

Now, any homeowner knows the three simple rules for going into your cellar. 1) Don't go into your cellar. 2) If you must go, don't take a flashlight. 3) If you do take a flashlight, don't turn it on. Or you'll be sorry.

But I had to go into my cellar, so I took an expert along: Brian, my neighbor. Bri is a carpenter, so shouldn't know anything about furnaces, so after a peek, we can shrug off the little quirk, and say we tried, then see how New England fares against Oakland with peace of mind.

So, armed with a flashlight (What did I just say?), me and Brian ventured into my cellar. I won't tell you what we saw along the way, but figure H. P. Lovecraft probably owned an old house. Many cobwebs deep, we found The Furnace.

It was rusty, of course, and huge, naturally, and it had pipes and

vents and wires and switches and manifolds and bivalves stuck all over it. And a jacket of (rusty) white.

"Asbestos!" groaned Brian. "Yeah, I saw your house cited on a TV special. The EPA asked Congress for a Superfund grant to clean it up, or else wanted to unannex your property to declare it a separate country. Man, we shouldn't even be *breathing* down here!"

See? Brian has that professional serviceperson's touch, such as helpfully prefacing all final estimates with, "I been in this business thirty years, and I've *never* seen..."

We shone the flashlight around (I'll never learn) and saw the whole History of Home Heating piled around us. Like Indiana Jones on amphetamines, Brian gave a running commentary on the archeology. "Okay, so it looks like this monster originally burned coal, because there's your coal chute and coal breakers. Then they converted to oil, 'cause there's the first, second, and third replacement burners. And over there looks like nine thousand dollars' worth of special pressurized fittings they sliced off with a hacksaw: that's when they tried to convert to natural gas. Oh, and here they cut through the floor for the woodstove conversion. And, jeez, that oil tank looks like it lost a war..."

He was being kind. The tank, which could hold several million gallons, or maybe thirty oil trucks' worth, was rusty (of course), with pipes and tubes and glass things you couldn't see through. I rubbed the glass gauge. Gothic letters read EMPTY. Underfoot I found a half-inch tube twisted off. So they'd disconnected the oil service just as they'd disconnected every other method of heating except setting fire to the walls.

"Funny," Brian noted, "you got an oil tank and an oil furnace, but you don't burn no oil. That is weird, even for an old house."

Yet the furnace was warm. In fact, hot.

The furnace had a big (rusty) iron door. An insulated switch read FURNACE ON/OFF. A little brown wire ran up to the ceiling, presumably to the thermostat, or maybe Radio Free Europe. I asked, "Should we turn off the furnace and look inside? Maybe we

can see what it *does* burn."

Brian looked as if I'd asked for a French kiss. "You're a -- whatd'theycallit -- first-time homeowner, aren't you? Trust an old hand. Leave well-enough alone."

Does anyone take advice, even when they ask for it?

I flicked off the switch -- no need to burn off my eyebrows just for curiosity -- and opened the furnace door with a dirty stick.

Inside, bolted to stanchions, sat a silver jetpack.

Another brown wire ran from the switch box to the pack.

Brian and I looked at each other.

I flipped the switch.

The jetpack *whooshed* into life. Blue-white flames roared out to heat the old radiator coils around the furnace.

I flipped off the switch. "Whatdya make of that?"

Brian pushed back his Porky Pig Celtics baseball hat. "Offhand, I'd say it's a rocket pack. What's it say on the side?"

I shone the light on a label. "Buck Rogers Model 2410."

Brian nodded absently and took the flashlight. In a corner of the cellar, he found some oily black straps connected by a metal disc. He scraped the disk. Fast-looking letters spelled GALACTIC RANGERS. "I missed this version of your conversions. Look, genuine leather." He tossed the straps back on the junk. "Who'd'ja say were the previous owners?"

I didn't know. I flipped the switch a few more times. The jetpack warmed the house just fine. "What powers it?"

Brian squatted and pointed. Between the twin tubes on the pack sat a small glass bubble, and inside was a jot of white. Brian borrowed the flashlight and stuck his head halfway into the furnace. "Ah! `Caution: Black Hole Fuel Cell. Keep out of reach of children.' I'll buy that. I'd hate to think what my kids could do with a black hole. Anyway, there's your answer." He straightened up.

"So whatdy'say?"

I closed the furnace door with the stick, flicked the switch, heard a muffled *whoosh*. "Well, we found out why we don't burn oil, and the furnace works. S'good enough for me."

"Me too," Brian nodded. "Why ask for trouble?"

As we stomped upstairs for an appointment with the Patseys and some Pabst, Brian said, "See? That was easy!"

The fateful words. I should have known better.

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About three o'clock in the morning -- most house emergencies happen then -- I heard the neighbor's dog barking.

Down in my living room.

I groped in my dresser for my secret, hidden flashlight, the one the kids don't dare drain the batteries of too low. The Doll pulled on her bathrobe. "What do you think it is, Honey? It's not a rat, is it?"

"No, dear." Raccoons and coyotes eat our rats, but I didn't need to tell her. "I'll go see."

Halfway down the stairs, I felt cold air swirl around my ankles. Someone had left a window open.

No, left the wall open.

A huge glob of shimmering slime with lumps and spouts and vacules all over -- sort of an organic version of my furnace -- had dissolved the wall and oozed through. The bottom half of my six-over-nine antique ripple-glass windows dripped like icicles. I'd just reglazed and painted that window last Thanksgiving.

The alien was dissolving the carpet, half a chair, and millions of Legos. My neighbor's dog, Otis, followed steadily, barking like a rock band trapped in a dumpster.

"Well," I told The Doll, "it's not a rat."

The thing slithered across the floor. Most of the carpet was gone,

but my in-laws had given us that. When the alien sizzled onto the floors, I flipped out. "Hey! Those are twenty-four inch pine planks! They're in the National Historic Register!"

The thing made a beeline, or slugline, for my furnace. The Doll said, "It must want that rocket pack you mentioned! I told you to let well-enough alone!"

"No, dear, you told me to find out -- Never mind." Toggling the switch must have sent a signal, and someone had come looking for their missing property. I wondered again about the previous owners, tried to remember if the furnace had been listed in the Truth & Disclosure statement.

The Doll looked out the bathroom window. "There's a silver spaceship in the back yard!"

"Great," I muttered, "it's probably caved in the septic system."

I watched the alien dissolve my cellar door. Otis got a little too close. The monster humped in the middle and flailed out a pod. The dog yelped once and got sucked into its body. Hell. Even if he did dump on my roses, I'd have to buy the neighbors another dog. That'd be easy: replacing the damned ripple glass was next to impossible.

The thing placidly oozed through my cellar door and down the stairs, single-minded as a building inspector.

The Doll asked, "Should I call 911?"

I thought about it. Which was worse? To have an alien destroy the house and feed us to little alienettes or carry us off to slavery in some fetid hellhole across the stars? Or to walk into Brinkley's Market for the *Globe* every day for the rest of my life and hear neighbors yell, "*Hey, found any aliens in your living room lately?*"

"No, I'll handle this. Where's the baseball bat?"

"Uh... In the back hall closet?"

"The *junk* closet? Never mind. I think I left the flatbar on the toilet."

I found it, sixteen inches of lethal blue steel with a little beaver in a hardhat on the label, and carefully inched down what was left of my cellar stairs.

The thing blubbered against the front of my furnace. It scoured off rust, but the iron slowed it down. I wondered why it wanted the jetpack, whether it had a grudge against the previous owners. Hell, maybe this character installed it and never got paid, yet another mechanic's lien.

Standing in the cellar doorway, I thumped the alien on the rump with my flatbar. "Hey! Whatever your beef, I own that jetpack, me and several banks! So --"

The thing humped in the middle, but I'd seen that trick before. I ducked. The pod whapped the wall, dissolved a patina of rust and dust. It returned to slobbering on my furnace door.

"Okay, have it your way." Inching along the wall, I circled the furnace, reached with a long arm, unlatched the door, and swung it open.

Sure enough, just like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, the alien oozed inside the furnace -- I told you it was huge -- and began to slobber on the jetpack. When most of it was inside, I whapped what hung outside with the flatbar. The bulk snapped out, then recoiled, and I boosted all of it inside.

I slammed the furnace door with a *clang!* and toggled the switch.

The jetpack went *whoosh!* The alien made a more complicated sound, but not for long.

The furnace seemed to run fine. I should have opened the door, just to check, but I'd learned my lesson. I retired upstairs.

"Is it gone?" asked The Doll. "What about that spaceship?"

I peeked out the window at winking lights. "That's an outdoor job. It waits till spring." In best homeowner fashion, I added, "Just ignore it; maybe it'll go away."

I stomped around in the barn, kicked up leaves and dust, found some plywood to cover the hole in the wall, and went to bed.

Laying back in the warmth, I felt that satisfaction that only a homeowner can feel when they've gotten a fix right.

Then I blew it. "That was easy."

Sure enough, it wasn't. In the morning, the spaceship was gone. But it had caved in the septic system.

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