

The Smiling Man

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Henry Evans didn't believe in ghosts until that night.

Henry was a young man living in the breathtaking countryside of Vienna, Austria. He lived on a farm in a breathtaking mountain range nestled in the heart of nature. As Henry stood at the base, he was in awe of the majestic peaks that stretched towards the sky. The mountains were adorned with lush greenery, dotted with vibrant wildflowers, and surrounded by crystal-clear streams cascading down their slopes. Henry breathed in a slow, deep breath of the fresh morning air, then he sighed in grief. "If only my beautiful Lily was here with me, she would have loved to be here," Henry sighed. Henry put his hand over his heart, remembering the woman he loved with all his soul. The sound of Lily's laughter was still ringing in Henry's ears. Tears began to stream down Henry's cheeks as the memory of Lily's death flashed in his mind. Henry's hand

tightened around Lily's locket, a small antique silver heart with a picture of their wedding day.

The day Lily left this world, the sun was shining but the air was fringed with grief. In her last bit of life, Lily whispered, "I will love you now, later, and forever Henry." "If tears could build a stairway, and memories a lane, I'd walk right up to Heaven and bring you home again," Henry sobbed as he felt Lily go limp in his arms. Henry screamed and begged through his sobs, trying to bring Lily back. "Please, my love. Don't leave me, I need you," Henry gasped through his tears. During the weeks prior to Lily's death, she started getting sick and delirious at an alarming rate. Three days before her death, Lily started screaming about a burnt man scratching her and tapping a pocket watch. Henry went pale when he saw the bloody tracks on Lily's arms, recognizing them as claw tracks. Unbridled tears finally fell from Henry's golden eyes, in their

depth an uncontrollable blaze burned as bright as Hephaestus's forge. As Lily drew her last breath, the sun began to set and it started to rain; the rain poured as if heaven itself was mourning the loss.

A few years later, the rumors of the smiling man began to spread. The rumor was of a victim in a housefire, but only the outline of the body was found. The wife of the victim was having an extramarital dalliance. The town suspected the wife set the fire after poisoning her husband with Botulinum toxin. The wife had made a contaminated dinner for her husband. A few hours later, the husband started to cough violently. He looked into his handkerchief, the white ornate lace fabric stained red with blood and small pieces of lung tissue. The husband tried to scream but his lungs filled with blood too rapidly, turning his screams into eerie gurgles. Blood started to pour from the man's hooked nose, his glasses thrown off as he

coughed violently. The glasses crashed to the floor, shattering on the red oak floorboards.

After the wife confirmed her husband was dead, she spilled her lamp oil onto the floor and she set the house ablaze as she ran off with the man who stole her heart away, only to be killed by her affair partner. Once the firefighters extinguished the fire, they could not find the body. Only the outline of the body burnt onto the floor was left. The firefighters never found the body, ruling the death as accidental.

On the night of Halloween one hundred years after the fire, Henry bought the Victorian house as he couldn't stand the little cottage anymore as it brought back too many memories of Lily. At first, the house seemed nothing extraordinary, but that changed slowly, as if the house itself was alive. It started off

small, like a teacup falling or the stairs creaking in the middle of the night. Then the anomalous occurrences became more frequent and extremely hazardous, such as the windows slamming shut and forks being thrown from the marble countertop. Henry started to have very vivid nightmares about a lanky smiling man tapping his silver pocketwatch. The smiling man would always rasp "Time's almost up." Henry woke up covered in a cold sweat. The same scars from Lily appearing every morning.

On that same Halloween night, Henry took a stroll to clear his mind after a nightmare. The night was cool and the full moon was bright in the sky, the stars twinkling like diamonds in the navy blue, midnight sky. The cold air cut at Henry's skin, making the scratches burn like a fire. The wind howled softly, dancing with the trees in a beautiful dance as old as time itself.

Suddenly a blood chilling screech cut through the cold fall breeze. Henry immediately stopped moving as his terror paralyzed him where he stood. The blood in Henry's veins started to freeze as he heard the ominous tick of a pocketwatch. Henry started to choke as the smell of ash and rotting flesh filled his lungs. Henry tried to cover his nose and mouth with his handkerchief, but the odor was too pungent to escape from.

Henry slowly turned towards the origin of the fowl odor, just as Henry saw the reason for the odor he went as pale as a full moon. All the color drained from Henry's face as he saw the lanky smiling man.

The smiling man was roughly eight feet tall, his skin was burnt and ashy. The smiling man slowly smiled, revealing his

decaying tongue and the mess of rotten, stained teeth in his mouth. The smiling man appeared almost skeletal with protruding ribs and long bony fingers. Henry looked into the smiling man's beady, black eyes. The smiling man's eyes looked soulless, but there was a deep unsettling depth. "Time is almost up," the smiling man rasped with a malicious tone in his voice. The smiling man slowly tapped the hand blown glass of his antique silver pocket watch with his long, bony finger.

"Your time is up, little lad," the smiling man rasped as if his voice box was damaged by the smoke of a fire. The smiling man adjusted his emerald green velvet suit jacket, slowly straightening his lapel. The smiling man looked human but there was something otherworldly about his aura, perhaps the ash grey skin or the way his skin sagged around his frame like it was three sizes too big for his frame.

As the smiling man crept closer, his joints creaked like the walls of an old house. The smiling man's skin barely clung to his emaciated frame. The smiling man unhinged his jaw, bones snapping and stitches popping.

The smiling man slowly started to feast on Henry's soul, sucking out of his body. Henry slowly began to feel tired and cold as his life essence slipped away. Henry became limp and his body hit the ground with a heavy thud as the last of his soul left his corpse. The smiling man slowly shifted to take on the appearance of Henry. The smiling man slowly walked back the path of Henry, taking over Henry's life. Slowly, all the memories of Henry faded until nothing was left.



