

Around Our Town...Legally Speaking

A Christmas Story



by R. Michael Shickich

This Christmas story comes courtesy of G. Dewar Laing, known to his friends and business associates in Ontario, Canada as "The Country Lawyer." Mr. Laing is a partner in the Law Offices of Laing & Parent, LLP. A page on his website (<http://thecountrylawyer.ca>) called "Musings" is where we found this story told from his perspective as an attorney. Enjoy, and have a magical and merry Christmas filled with wonder and possibility.

by: G. Dewar Laing

One of my favorite Christmas stories is one that happened in summer.

Years ago, when my kids were young, we lived in an old house that had two big fireplaces. My wife wisely concluded that the best time to clean chimneys was when they were not in use. One summer, she called

a chimney cleaning service from the Yellow Pages.

The front doorbell rang one morning in late summer, and I answered. In the driveway was a beat-up van with a sign declaring the vehicle to be related to the chimney cleaning business in some way. On the front porch stood two rough looking young men, each wearing t-shirts proclaiming them to also be involved in the chimney cleaning business somehow. They had long hair, dirty nails, scraggly beards and lots of tattoos. I must note that this was before tattoos were fashion statements. Back then, tattoos generally adorned the bodies of people who wanted to ensure that you knew that they already had a criminal record or were diligently in the process of acquiring one.

I recognized these guys as the undesirables they no doubt were right away. What better way to "case a joint" than to be invited in as a "chimney sweep"? What had my wife been thinking?

One of these guys didn't want to make eye contact with me. The other one seemed nervous when I demanded to know why they were there. He said they had an appointment. My wife arrived behind me to confirm this fact, as she graciously invited them in. I stood blocking the doorway. She asked over my shoulder if either one of them wanted coffee, at which I turned to look at her in disbelief. The chimney sweeps mistook the purpose of my turn and started to enter. I instinctively blocked the door again, but now it was embarrassing. I hesitated a moment longer and then, with obvious reluctance, moved aside to let them into the house.

They declined the coffee offer and set to work covering all the furniture with drop cloths. It was

perhaps rude, but I stood in the living room doorway to watch them, no doubt looking very suspicious. I was joined by my two little boys, who were wide-eyed that these obvious "tough guys" were in our house. In my mind, I named the nervous one "Bob", because he kept bobbing his head up and down. He just seemed too anxious to ensure that everything was okay. Coincidentally, I think that may have been his real name.

The other one I just dubbed "Shifty". Because he seemed shifty. Okay, maybe I was a little too suspicious.

Once all the furniture and knick-knacks had been moved and draped, and once all the floors were covered, they directed their attention to the chimney, itself. They brought in brooms and extension rods from their van. They put on big overalls and masks. They studiously ignored me as they got down to work.

Shifty got out a flashlight and lay on his back in the fireplace. He shone the light up the flue. Something seemed to catch his eye, and he struggled into a sitting position, his head and his arms disappearing up the chimney. Then he called out to his buddy, "Bob!" (See? That's why I think it was his real name.)

Bob hustled over and knelt down on the tarp beside Shifty. Shifty called out again, "Bob, come here. I think I see one. Hold my feet." Bob knelt on Shifty's boots as Shifty pushed himself up and reached even further into the chimney. Soot was coming down now and Bob started coughing.

Then Shifty yelled, "Okay. Okay, I got it."

Bob eased back as Shifty wriggled free of the

chimney, covered with black soot from the waist up. But in his dirty hand he held a strip of perfectly clean, bright, red velvet.

Shifty and Bob both stared at it for a moment in obvious wonder, and then Shifty said, "Bob, you think this is from the Big Guy?" Bob said, "I don't know. Where else could it come from?" They both turned to look at my two boys, who joined them in the soot by the fireplace to stare at the strip of red velvet in silent awe. Then Shifty asked my youngest son, Brendon, "Hey, kid, you want this? I already got one. I find 'em once in a while."

Brendon took that strip of red velvet with the greatest of reverence. Shifty, Bob and I grinned at each other over their heads as the two boys stared down in wonder at that magical piece of cloth.

We kept it for many years, pulling it out at Christmas, just in case Santa needed to mend his suit. I never got the chance to apologize to them, but I continue to think of "Bob" and "Shifty" each holiday season, wishing them the best, whoever and wherever they are.

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