

Story #4: The Kid in the Walls

Oswald Mulligan loved lollipops. Every family portrait showed him with a stick poking out out his mouth and his cheek bulging with candy.

He loved them so much that it's all that ever went into or came out of his mouth. No one could remember what his voice sounded like. For all they knew his voice was a quiet sucking slurping noise.

Oswald also had the biggest eyes of all the Mulligan kids. It always looked like he was trying to stare through the wall.

It creeped out most people.

The Mulligan house, as you know, has furnace heat. The furnace in the basement is a modified locomotive firebox. It used to be the engine of a train that belonged to the Czar of Russia. It still had wheels and gears on the side that would chug around and around. However, raised off the floor a couple of inches and without a track, the furnace wasn't going anywhere soon.

The heat traveled to all corners of the house through a labyrinth series of ducts and tubes. This maze of air ducts was so complicated that no one really knew where they all were or went.

It did make it possible to listen in on almost any room in the house, if you happened to be near the right vent at the right time and the furnace was either on or off.

You could, if you wanted to, listen in on dinner being prepared in the east wing kitchen, while you sat in the west wing bathtub. However, due to air pressure and temperature changes, when the furnace was on you wouldn't be able to hear the kitchen anymore, but you'd now be able to hear someone chatting in the second floor arboretum.

Some people believe that the layout of the air ducts was designed by a professional maze designer, who was also a dyslexic gypsy. There are also some people who believe the tubes were laid out by M.C. Escher.

Regardless, if you somehow found yourself in one of these ducts, it would be very likely that you'd never find your way out.

One day, as usual, Oswald was sucking on a new lollipop. This one was called a “Dum-Dum.” It would soon turn out that Oswald was the Dum-Dum.

It was a cold day and the furnace was chugging all day and all night to keep the house warm.

Oswald was in the rooftop greenhouse looking for a place he could sit and enjoy his Dum-Dum. He enjoyed eating his candy in nature. The air vents in the greenhouse weren't covered that day. Earlier that week the Creeping Ivy had crept into and around the metal grates that covered the vents. It crept and gripped and bent the grates.

Probably on purpose.

So, the grate coverings were in the shop being pounded back into shape. The Creeping Ivy was repotted into a cardboard box until it learned to behave.

Oswald found himself sitting in the shade of the Eucalyptus tree near an open vent. He could hear the sounds of his sister SusieAnn arguing with Nathan about the volume of the radio.

The radio, by the way, was currently playing jazz blaringly loud. Both SusieAnn and Nathan were arguing that it should be louder, however between their own yelling and the blaring jazz they couldn't actually hear that they were on the same side of the argument.

Oswald leaned closer and closer to the vent so he could hear the argument better. (All of the Mulligan kids love a good argument.) He leaned until he tumbled into the vent hole. With a bump and a slide and another bump and a crack on the side of his head. It sounded like a humming bird falling through a tuba.... take a moment and imagine that.

In the blink of an eye, Oswald was gone. All that remained was the wrapper of his Dum-Dum.

Oswald was gone, but not dead. Just lost in the air ducts. We can hear him every so often, his little feet tapping around the ducts. Sometimes we'll see his big staring eyes looking out from one of the vents, but since Oswald doesn't talk we don't know if he wants to come out or not. Usually when someone sees his creepy eyeballs staring out from a vent, they disappear quickly into the darkness, with a scurrying shuffle.

We've been throwing candy into the air vents for him, and that seems to keep him going. For now, we'll just have to be happy hearing his scuttling around, his eyes poking out every so often, and the soft slurping of candy being eaten within the walls of the Mulligan house.

It's a strange infestation, but he is family.