

Tom Sniffy the Chimney Swifty

by Brian Day

Nicholas Bradley the Third crept quietly down the cellar stairs and peered around the old, wooden, support post at the bottom. His query was kneeling in front of the ancient furnace. The old man had removed some metal panels from the furnace and had placed them to one side. Nicholas knew the man was old because he had spotted the man's bald head and white whiskers when the man had knocked on the front door. Alerted by the knocking, Nicky had spied down from his bedroom window. He had been pretending to be sick so that he would not have to go to school.

Nicky was in the First Grade. He was in the First Grade for the second year in a row. Mommy just could not understand why he hadn't passed First Grade last year. She knew that he certainly wasn't stupid. No, no, he was terribly bright - probably too bright for the mundane lessons of First Grade. Having to learn stuff bored little Nicky. That was why he misbehaved so much. Poor Nicky was sick a lot too, so he missed quite a few days of school. He probably missed one day out of every week.

Phys Ed was scheduled that day, so Nicholas had begun to feel ill immediately after eating his Cocoa Puffs for breakfast that morning. Phys Ed always made him sick. Besides, it was the day after Halloween, and Halloween had occurred on a Sunday, and kids should always get a day off of school for Halloween.

His sitter, Old Phyllis, had answered the front door to let the heating serviceman in. The serviceman had removed his hat when he had greeted Old Phyllis and that was when Nicholas had seen that he was bald and that he wore a soot-stained white beard. Nicky always felt much better around Ten O'clock because that was when Old Phyllis stretched out on the sofa to snore herself to sleep. The serviceman's arrival had delayed her nap for a few minutes while she had shown him the way to the cellar, but she had soon sprawled out again and turned on her soap operas. Nicky could hardly wait to see what the old guy was up to. As soon as Phyllis had started her wheezing, snorting racket from the couch, Nicky had begun his stalk to the cellar.

Only the man's fat hinny protruded from the cabinet at the bottom of the furnace. The pale, puffy tops of the serviceman's behind squished up out of his pants, revealing his butt crack. Nicky clamped his hand over his mouth to stifle a snicker. His hand smelled like the M&Ms that he had eaten earlier that morning while he had waited for Old Phyllis to fall asleep. He would have to eat some more of the candy as soon as he was

finished with this funny old man. A spider crawled across the bottom step where Nicky crouched. Pinching the spider up by one leg, Nicky padded silently in his stockinged feet over behind the serviceman and dropped the Granddaddy Longlegs into the exposed, dark crevasse.

"Woohaa!" shouted the serviceman, followed by "Son of a bitch!" when he slammed his head into the top of the metal cabinet that he was working in.

Nicholas jumped back to the second step, giggling like the silliest girl in his class, as the serviceman tried to back out of the furnace with one finger poked into the crack of his butt, trying to subdue the beastly spider. When Mister Squiggly had been turned into Mr. Smudge, the serviceman sat down with his back against the furnace and rubbed the back of his head. Nicky expected the man to come storming after him at any moment, but the man only sat where he was and studied the boy.

"Did you bump your noggin?" Nicky asked coyly.

"Yes, young man, I did. Something crawled into the seat of my britches when I was very busy doing an important job," the serviceman replied.

"My pet spider wanted to see where you put your pencil so you won't lose it," Nicky said smartly.

"I'm afraid your spider has a bigger head-ache than I do, and his is permanent."

"I'll get another," Nicky said.

"Maybe your old spider's big brother will crawl out of this chimney to replace the one you have lost. Maybe he won't be so friendly," the serviceman said with a slight smile.

"Aint nothin' up that chimney but soot," Nicky snapped back. "Say, what's your name, Mister?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" the serviceman snapped back just as quickly.

Nicky laughed. "Well Mr. Wouldn't you liketoknow," he asked, "Just what do you think you're doing to our heater?"

"It's called a furnace and I am going to tighten the belt on the blower and grease the bearings, if you must know, Mr. Big Nose."

Nicky stepped down from the stairs to get a little closer.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

"Well get over here where you can see," the man said. "You might as well learn something at home this morning, seeing as how you obviously didn't want to go to school." He handed Nicky a big flashlight, saying, "Here, point this light into that metal box down there."

Nicky did as he was told for once. The light illuminated a large metal object that resembled a flattened snail's shell lying on its back. A finned wheel was encased within the snail's shell.

"That looks like the wheel that my hamster plays on in his cage," Nicholas observed.

"Very good!" said Mr. Wouldn'tyouliketoknow, "It's called a squirrel cage and the entire thing is called the blower. Now hand me that screwdriver with the red handle from my tool pouch and I'll take out a couple of screws so that I can pull the whole thing out of the cabinet."

Nicholas liked all of the shiny tools in their special pockets in the tool pouch. He handed the red handled screwdriver to Mr. Wouldn'tyouliketoknow and, when the serviceman ducked his head back into the metal blower cabinet, Nicky pulled another screwdriver out of the tool pouch and stuffed it into the waistband of his pajama bottoms. After removing the locking screws, the serviceman pulled the blower assembly out of the cabinet, on its support rails. Nicky crawled in closer to see what was going on. Behind the blower loomed a dark cavern. Nicky stuck his head into the cavern and discovered a tunnel leading off to the left.

"Better get your head outa there!" Mr. Wouldn'tyou growled.

"Why? What's in there?" Nicky asked. "Where does it go?"

"It goes clear to China and there's nothing in there that you would want."

In defiance, Nicky crawled in a little deeper. "Maybe Mommy has hidden some of my Christmas presents in here. I can't

find any of them anywhere else in this house and I've looked everywhere," he said.

"Santa Claus brings Christmas presents to all good children. So I guess that leaves you out! Now get the hell out of there!" Wouldn'tyou snarled as he tugged harshly on one of Nicky's legs.

Nicky scrambled out of the metal cabinet. "Santa Claus is a lie. Mommy says there is no such thing and that she buys all of my presents," he said matter-of-factly.

The serviceman wrestled the blower back onto its rails and slid it into place. "Santa is magical," he said curtly as he replaced the locking screws.

"Mommy says there isn't any magic left in the world. She says that Daddy used to promise her magical things and they all turned out to be lies. She says that she will never lie to me, especially about silly things like Santa Clause."

"Maybe your momma needs a new papa," mumbled the serviceman, half to himself.

Nicky piped up, "Oh she has a boyfriend, but I don't like him much. His hands are rough and he has a funny looking finger."

"Nothing wrong with rough hands," said Wouldn'tyou, "They are a sign of a hard worker."

He handed the red-handled screwdriver back to Nicky. Nicky noticed that his hands were much rougher than his Mommy's boyfriend's were. Nicky began to wonder about the tunnel that led away from the bottom of the furnace. He doubted that it led to China. When he had crawled down into the ditch that the men that had been working on the street in front of the house had dug, they had also told him the ditch was going to China. Mommy told him people always said that about holes in the ground because China was located on the other side of the Earth. Perhaps if Nicky could catch the neighbor's kitty, Fruffy, he could stuff it into the tunnel and wait to see where the cat came out. Nicky had used Fruffy for so many experiments by now that she was getting very hard to catch.

"Nicholas Bradley! Where have you snuck off too?" screeched Old Phyllis from the top of the cellar stairs.

Nicholas ignored her calling.

"You better get up there," Wouldn't you advised.

Nicky ignored him too.

"He's down here stealing things," Mr. Wouldn't you liketoknow bellowed up the stairs.

Nicky jumped to his feet and scrambled up the stairs, clutching his pilfered screwdriver carefully through his pajama bottoms.

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Stillness enveloped the Bradley house as Nicholas slid silently out of his bed to creep over to his toy box. Lifting the painted, wooden lid, he reached deep down into the bottom, among the cluttered pile of video games, to pull out his stash of Halloween candy. Selecting a couple of Snickers Bars, he quickly unwrapped them and stuffed them into his mouth. The chocolate made him thirsty, so he decided to pad out into the kitchen for a glass of milk. Of course he couldn't bother with a glass; he drank directly from the carton. A liter bottle of orange soda captured his interest instead of the milk. Orange soda soon dribbled down from his chin to puddle on the linoleum floor. He rubbed it out of sight with his stockinged foot.

A muffled knocking emanated from the basement beneath his feet to freeze him in his tracks. Then he relaxed, realizing the noise was probably only Fruffy down there, searching for a mouse. Suddenly, Nicholas remembered his plan to send Fruffy through the ductwork tunnel at the bottom of the furnace. Now would be his best opportunity! But he would need his screwdriver. He retrieved it quickly from his sock drawer in his bedroom. From past experience, he knew that when he turned on the cellar light, Fruffy would hunker down wherever she was in hopes that he would not spot her - stupid cat. After hitting

the light switch, Nicky charged down the cellar stairs, ready to pounce on the terrified kitty. No cat was visible anywhere in the dingy basement. The tapping sound resumed its insistent calling from the region of the furnace. Nicky padded over to the furnace.

"Damn furnace man!" he thought to himself, mimicking his mommy's voice, "He must have left something loose in there!"

The wind played murmuring tunes down the big tin flute of the chimney like whispers in church. Nicky leaned in to the small rectangular opening in the middle of the furnace and called up softly, "Who, whooooo are youuuuu?"

A scratchy, high-pitched, yet masculine voice called out from the furnace, "Hi there, youngster! Hello! Hello! May I come in?"

Nicky stepped back quickly, but responded, "Where are you?"

"Lift the metal door and I'll come in," the voice said.

"What do you want?" Nicky asked suspiciously.

"Come on, open up. I've got a cat in a sack in here and it's crowded," urged the voice.

Nicky sprang to the furnace and began pulling at the cabinet door on the bottom.

"Not that door! Nobody comes in that door," demanded the hidden voice. "Lift up the top door and be careful. It has sharp edges."

Nicky pushed up on the edge of the metal panel above the blower box panel. When the panel moved upward an inch or two, four twiggy black fingers slithered over the edge and forced the door up off of its locking lugs. Again, Nicky sprang back. A soot-black character poured himself out of the top portion of the furnace like smoke billowing downward. He turned back to the furnace to wrench a lumpy, squirming, green sack out behind him. The strange figure stood tall and coarse hided as a hickory tree, but black as tamarack. He wore a pointed cap, stiff with soot like the rest of his garment. His boots were pointed, with steel toes that hooked downward. Nicky noticed that the heels also possessed backward-facing horseshoes of sharp-edged steel with little claws in the middle of the curve. He placed a finger on one side of his hawkish nose and blew out a cloud of soot, then repeated the action with the back of the same finger for the other nostril. He wiped the droplet of snot hanging from the end of his beak away with his sleeve.

Peering down at Nicky from eyes black as a midnight thunderstorm, he asked through glistening white teeth pointed as Fruffy's fangs, "What do they call you, boy?"

"You're the guest. You answer first," Nicky shot back as he pondered whether to run from the basement screaming for his mother or not.

"Fair enough," the creature answered, "I am Tom, Tom Sniffy the Chimney Swift." "

"What are you doing in our furnace?" Nicky blurted out.

"It's impolite of you not to introduce yourself after I have given you my name," Tom said with a curl at the corners of his wide mouth that allowed the incandescent light of the cellar's single bulb to glint off his long canines.

"My name is Nicholas Bradley the Third," Nicky responded with a defiance that he usually only deployed on his first grade teacher.

"Well you are a bold one, Nick," Tom retorted, "I'll give you that. I've got a brother named Nicholas. Some people call him a saint but I know he's a big phony. People think he brings presents at Christmas, but, most of the time, he is just snooping around and raiding their refrigerators - the fat slob."

Nicky repeated, "What are you doing here?"

"Actually, I work for the big faker," Tom Sniffy continued. "Old Santa Klutz can't get his fat rear-end down most chimneys or stove pipes these days, especially if the flue is clogged with soot. He used to be as agile as I am, when we were kids, but not anymore, not after years of beer and pretzels every night. So now he pays me to clear the way down, or to find an alternate route into the house for him. I think he'll

be slipping in the back door at a lot of places this year, including your house."

"We keep our doors locked at night. Besides, Mommy buys all my Christmas presents," Nicholas said.

"I usually snatch an extra key from houses like yours when I make my reconnaissance visit, or I practice picking the lock," Tom explained, stabbing one of his stiletto index fingers effortlessly into the mortar between the bricks of the cellar wall.

"What does reconnaissance mean?" Nicky asked.

Tom rolled his eyes upward in thought for a second.

"Spying," he answered.

The sooty, green bag wiggled a little where it slumped against the wall. Tom prodded it gruffly with his steel toe, "Settle down there, you!" he snarled.

"What are you going to do with Fruffy?" Nicky asked.

"I thought that I would shove him into the ductwork to see where he comes out in the house," Tom said slyly.

"I got a screwdriver!" Nicky volunteered, pulling the pilfered tool from the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

"Well now, how prepared you are! Just like a Boy Scout," Tom said as he snatched the shiny screwdriver away from Nicolas.

Nicky stood with his mouth wide open in objection, but Tom Sniffy was already stooped over, prying off the lower door of

the furnace to remove the blower. Nicky decided to demand the return of his screwdriver later. He knelt down beside Tom to watch the twiggish creature's progress. Tom pulled a long, thin, green candle from a concealed pocket in his sooty clothing and lighted it by some trick of snapping his sandpapery fingers.

"Here, hold this so I can see what I'm doing," he said, handing the strange candle to Nicky.

A sputtering green flame, more like a Fourth of July sparkler, burned from the candle's wick. Tom Sniffy wrenched the blower assembly out from the metal cabinet and peered into the darkness of the exposed tunnel.

He snatched up Nicky's arm by the wrist and dragged the candle into the entrance to the ductwork tunnel, hissing, "I see something. Gim'me more light!"

Nicky involuntarily followed the candle into the mouth of the tunnel. "What is it? What do you see?" he asked.

"It looks like a bundle of some kind, or a present," Tom said.

"I knew it! I knew Mommy hid my presents down here someplace! Do you see any more? I can't believe there is only one!" Nicolas exclaimed.

"I only see one little bundle, but maybe there are more farther in. Some people do hide their children's Christmas

presents in places like this," Tom mused. "Here, take the candle, crawl in there, and have a look."

Like a termite in a timber, Nicky squirmed past Tom Sniffy into the passage with the green candle. The silhouette of a package, wrapped with a ribbon and bow, could be glimpsed far down the tunnel. Nicky scrambled quickly down the passage to the present. Gripping the package between his knees and holding the candle in one hand, he tore at the plain brown wrapping, thinking to himself, "Pretty crappy wrapping job for Mommy's work."

"What is it?" called Tom from the blower cabinet.

"Just a minute!" Nicky snarled, "It's my present anyway; not yours!"

Suddenly, the box lid came off, revealing a big lump of black coal in the bottom of the box.

"Shit!" exclaimed Nicky, using a word that he knew was strictly forbidden, "This isn't very funny! Not funny at all!"

He looked up from his box, back down the tunnel toward Tom, just in time to see the Chimney Swifty shoving the blower back into place. "Hey!" Nicky shouted, as he began scrambling back toward the blower cabinet.

"My brother has good tools," Tom mumbled to himself as he screwed in the locking screws to the blower and slammed the cabinet door in place. "Now for a little of Cousin Jack's

magic," he said to himself. He sucked up a great gulp of air, then exhaled a long black streamer of cloud that moved like a spidery shadow. The shadow crept up the stairs to find the household thermostat. Icy, spidery fingers covered the thermostat like the hand of Death. Down in the basement, the furnace roared to life. Flames leaped from the burners above the blower cabinet and curled up into the bowels of the furnace. Some even curled out of the furnace as if trying to catch a victim to pull inside.

"In a minute," Tom said absently to the flames.

Meanwhile, inside the ductwork, Nicky had made his way to the blower at the end of the tunnel. He reached out to the squirrel cage, hoping to remove it from his path in some way. Tom laughed a hideous chuckle. The blower kicked on. Two of Nicky's fingers snipped off.

Screaming in pain, and clutching his injured hand under his other armpit, Nicky wiggled away from the whirling squirrel cage. "Let me out! I'm hurt!" he cried, over and over again, but no one could hear him beyond the howling blower. The green candle sputtered down the tunnel a short distance, where he had flung it when he had lost his fingers. He crawled back to the green glow, on his knees and one hand, than sat by the candle, sobbing and wailing. Eventually, the wailing subsided to

whimpering, as Nicky grew tired and the intense pain faded to a numb ache.

Something whispered far off down the tunnel; a voice murmured some indiscernible nursery rhyme. Nicholas stifled his whimpering and strained to hear.

"Spiders spin webs to catch a meal, webs work fine a wound to seal," sang the distant voice.

Nicky noticed some evil looking cobwebs dangling within reach in the corners of the ductwork, but he shuddered at the thought of pulling them down and wrapping them around his aching stubs.

Coming from the darkness behind Nicky's ear, the tinny voice became a snarl this time, "Use the webs to stop the red! Do it soon or you'll be DEAD!"

Nicky sprang from the looming voice, snatched the cobwebs, and wadded them onto his oozing stubs. The webs made the wounds sting severely and Nicky began to sob again. When his crying finally began to relent, he could hear the voice singing once more, far down the tunnel. The voice was sweet and soothing now.

"Bring your candle green and bright; and you'll be out before daylight," it cooed.

"I can't crawl all night," Nicky cried, "I'm too tired and I'm scared."

"In these tunnels live big rats. They are eaten by mad cats!" the voice recited.

Nicky heard a purring sound approaching from the direction of the furnace. The purring became a rumbling that Nicky could feel through the ductwork. Huge, yellow, feline eyes glinted in the darkness.

"Crawl Nicky! Crawl!" demanded the voice, and Nicky crawled! He crawled for miles and hours, hours and miles. He crawled around corners right and left. He crawled up stairs and down slides. He grew tired and stopped to rest, but the eyes always followed. The monstrous cat would yowl a bloodthirsty cry that would freeze Nicky's blood and send him scurrying on after the insistent voice.

"Move your hands, Nicky; move your feet. I know that Kitty wants to eat," echoed back from the darkness far ahead.

Just as Nicky was about to give up, to lie down, and let the cat have him, light appeared faintly down the passage. Gathering his last ounce of strength, Nicky scuttled down the tunnel like an ant after sugar. As his head burst out of the tunnel exit, strong, black, spidery hands snatched him under each armpit to swing him up into the glaring light.

"Rats in the cellar!" roared Tom Sniffy.

Tom spun Nicholas around in mid-air to face him. He was sitting on a huge, red satin throne - much too wide for his

narrow, bony, black butt. Nicky looked down between his dangling feet, expecting to see a huge cat emerge from the tunnel mouth where it opened beneath the legs of the throne.

"Meooowww! Meooowww!" yeowled Tom and his eyes glinted yellow. Then he laughed his hideous cackle.

Regaining his haughty attitude, Nicholas demanded, "Where am I? How did you get here? Why did you shut me in that nasty tunnel, you filthy spider man?"

"Spiderman is a silly cartoon, kid. I'm a Chimney Swiftly and that is an entirely different cat," Tom corrected him tersely.

"Oh yeah? Then what about Mary Poppins, dancing on the roof tops, Chime Chiminey Cherrie, and all that Walt Disney stuff?" Nicky demanded.

"Daffy Dick Van Dyke never even met a real Chimney Swiftly! But rest assured, someday soon, I'm going to pay that skinny, old faker a visit to straighten him out on a few things," Tom growled.

"Who are you calling skinny? Your behind sure doesn't fit that chair you're in. Now where am I?" Nicky sassed back.

"This chair? This is Brother Santa's chair. He's out of town for awhile, so I'm using it while I direct his shop for him."

"So I guess that means I'm at the North Pole. I knew I had crawled a long way but I never would have guessed clear to the North Pole," Nicky exclaimed.

"This ain't the North Pole, kid, although it gets plenty cold enough in the winter here. This is China," Tom explained as he stood up from the throne, still holding Nicky suspended at arm's length. "Time to find you a seat that fits your behind. Time to put you to work. That's why you're here."

Nicky squirmed to get free and shouted, "I'm not working for you or anybody! You can't make me!"

Tom slammed him down into an empty chair beside a long worktable where other small people bent over various projects. "Shut up and pick up that paint brush!" he commanded.

Nicky stared at the people on either side of him. "These people are green! They're Elves! They know how to make toys and things. I am not an Elf!" he insisted.

"Oh yeah Smarty? Then what do you call this color?" Tom asked, snatching up Nicky's good hand to hold in front of the boy's face.

To his horror, Nicky saw that his own skin was indeed as green as a 7-UP bottle.

"Spent too much time under the light of the green candle. It happens to all of you on the journey," Tom mused. "Now quit stalling and get to work."

Nicky lost his nerve and began to cry. "I can't work," he shouted through bitter tears, " I hurt my hand when you locked me under the furnace."

"Oh! I nearly forgot!" Tom exclaimed, "I saved your fingers for you - sort of. I went upstairs in your old house and searched under the heat registers - you know - those grate things in the floor where you hide things from your mother and Old Phyllis. Your fingers were thrown up through the furnace with the hot air where they landed in the upstairs heating ducts. I found them in the bathroom vent. Problem is, I travel by smoke. It's a lot faster than the tunnel system you came through. I had to throw your fingers onto the furnace burners so that they could travel with me." He opened a small, green, cloth bag, which he had pulled from his pocket and held it out so that Nicky could view the contents. "See," he said, "Nothing left but black ashes."

Nicky threw his head down on his arms on the tabletop and sobbed inconsolably.

"Oh all right! I'll fix it, Cry Baby," Tom snapped.

He pulled the bag wide open and spat into it. Rubbing the mess inside together, he yanked Nicky's injured hand out from under his head, jammed the open bag over the scabby stubs, and tied it on securely with the drawstrings.

"There!" he said, "Those will grow back in a few weeks if you leave that bag alone. It will stink some and itch a lot, but you'll get your fingers back. They will look more like blackened claws though than the little-boy fingers that you had before. Now hold the toys with the bad hand and paint with the other. When your hand heals, I'll start you at stitching sneakers," he said as he turned to walk away.

"I'll run away!" Nicky shouted after him. "I'll run outside and they will see that I'm not Chinese and they will send me back to America."

Tom laughed, "Everyone looks different from each other in China. No one pays any attention to the little, green children who work here. No one cares how we treat you. Besides, this sweat shop brings in far too much money to China for the Chinese to wish to disturb it in any way."

"When Santa comes back, I'll tell him!" Nicky shouted.

"Santa chose this place, you little fool. He seldom comes here himself though, what with his homes all over the world. Right now, he might be at his ranch in Wyoming or his beach house in Tahiti. Who knows? You don't believe in him anyway," sneered Tom.

"My mommy will miss me! She will tell the police and they will find me. Even in China, they will find me!" Nicholas shouted in desperation.

"No, your mommy won't miss you, Nick. Fruffy wasn't in that bag that I brought into your cellar. I brought a replacement for you inside that sack. Another little boy had worked here a long, long time. He slowly learned many things over the years and years that he spent working here in that very chair. He learned what fear, despair, and loneliness are. Most of all, he learned courtesy and grace. He learned not to be selfish, and to care about others. Ironically, he grew to look a lot like you. He had forgotten his old name after all those years, so we called him Nicky. I stuffed him into your old bed, told him to behave himself, and, above all, to keep his mouth shut about us or I would come back to get him. Granted, he is still a little green and spindly, but you were supposed to be sick anyway. By the time he eats a little Thanksgiving turkey and absorbs some of the glow from all those Christmas lights, he will be as fat and pink as you ever were. In fact, he will most likely turn out a whole lot better looking. I know he'll be a lot better child to raise than you ever were. Your mommy will thank the Lord above for the change in you and never even suspect the changeling. I'm sure he will behave like a perfect angel, and, just to make certain, as the old song goes, Santa will be dropping by every Christmas Eve to see whether he has been naughty or nice," Tom Sniffy explained, "Yes, New Nicholas

will be quite a fine Christmas present indeed! Now... GET TO  
WORK!"

THE END