

## **The Burnt Man**

I come from the outskirts of a small town in the south of England. It's a quaint town, if I'm honest, that doesn't really have much to put it on the map. Our history has mostly been silenced and mundane; farms surround us, a coal mine was our major source of trade until that was exhausted in the early twenties, and other than routine, there's really not much else going for us.

However, I'm wanting to tell you all about the one thing that really caused a stir in the town a few decades ago – the ripples of which are still felt today. It's hardly going to be a tourist trap, quite the opposite if anything. But, it's infinitely more interesting than farms and coal mines, even if for the wrong reasons.

This is, as the title suggest, 'The Burnt Man'.

There have been so many tales about him that had changed, evolved and morphed over the years - fitting as such is the nature of flames - that it seemed as if people had outright forgotten whether it was factual or folk lore.

He somehow stemmed from individual strange occurrences, and bloomed in to our home grown 'boogie man'.

From what I've overheard, read, gathered and remember, the birth of the Burnt Man legend was down to a report from a woman who had been followed one night. This must have been late eighties, early nineties. Apparently, the report was shrugged off because the woman was known for *enhancing the truth*, especially if she'd been at the one pub in town. Awful, I know – but it was a different time.

But, not long after, more report started flooding in. So many so that there had to be some iota of truth to it. Not only were more, 'reputable' women claiming they'd been followed, but the stories all had similar qualities. And this was before the Burnt Man was public knowledge. All at night, all walking alone, all said their stalker kept a safe distance – would just stop walking if they turned around - but maintained it until they turned a corner and fled.

Everyone in the town knew each other. If not directly, at least via a friend or family member. So, the fact no-one could quite put a finger on who the mysterious figure could be, it caused quite a stir.

The embers of the story were fanned when, after a month or two of reports and no successful action, some of the women had managed to catch a glimpse of him, or so they claimed. From what I can recall, there was an anxious excitement that blazed from mind to mind, and everywhere from the post office, to the school, to the pub, to the doctor's office, there was some version of the Burnt Man being told.

The descriptions have been so varied over the years, that it's difficult to discern whether the mundane or fantastical reports came first, they seemed to have been bandied about with such a fervour that it became a form of entertainment moreover warning. Some of what stuck with me are:-

'Most of the face burnt, so that only tough scar-tissue and pink, sundered flesh could be seen,' which was quickly contradicted with, 'wears a mask and hat to cover his disfigurement.'

'No eyebrows, or eyelashes. No facial hair. Completely bald.' Though who would get so close to see?

Others claimed, 'Scalp scorched so severely that only tufts and clumps sprouted out sporadically and wildly, and even they were tinder dry and wisps at most.'

Some people said he was burnt so bad, that his flesh still glowed with the embers. Others said that in his eyes, you could see the flames of hell flickering.

Soon after, there came the idea that certain tell-tale signs could be spotted that let you know he was around, even if you couldn't see him. If there was an inexplicable smell of sulphur, then he was lurking nearby – your only cause of action would be to flee the scene and find someone to help.

If you were walking and happened upon a pile of ash, it meant he'd been there a long time. (This one, apparently, had most evidence, but then was later debunked when a group of teens were cautioned by the police after they were caught leaving trails and mounds of ash outside the houses of widowed women).

If you heard high-pitched laughter, or squeaky voices conversing in a different language, they were his 'minions' that scouted prime victims.

My favourite one was, apparently, so long as you had a keen eye, you could work out his location in advance if you looked above the houses and spotted a thin trail of smoke.

I used to be obsessed with the idea that, no matter what I was doing, no matter where I was, there could be a scream, or a cry for help at any moment. Whether from a prank, or an imagined sighting, I didn't care. It simply fascinated me. Maybe *because* the town was so boring, and this element of danger offered a remedy to the mundanity, but still.

Though, after a while, the reports grew more worrying, and took a sinister turn. People were no longer being followed, but attacked and... more. This substantiated a lot of the fear that people were feeling, and I suppose it took the excitement away and replaced it with genuine danger. At least for a while.

Though, it transpired that these reports always claimed the man was wearing a mask and a hat. They flooded in so fast and so widespread, for the size of the town, that it caused further panic, and then theories began to increase the velocity of the rumour mill.

People began to wonder whether some of these attacks were from opportunists, taking advantage of this feared assailant and dressing themselves to fit his fabled aesthetic, going out and paying heed to their urges of malcontent whilst having a ready cooked scapegoat to take the blame.

Some believed there was an organised group, whether local or from afar, it was never made clear. Whispers of a cult were entertained with this theory.

Some outright went and decided that, with such a volume, the Burnt Man was in sooth a supernatural being, and he was employing some diabolic power to increase his activity.

Soon after the attacks, the whole Burnt Man phenomena began edging towards its climax when people began disappearing without a trace, and finally, when four bodies were found – bound and burnt - in one of the stables about a mile out of town, a strict curfew was enforced for both men and women.

Of course, the initial response to this was that the farmer was the Burnt Man all along, but that was quickly disproven when his own body was found, also burnt and bound.

The town had been more tense than it ever had been, and the vigil held for the deceased was heartbreakingly sparse, seeing as most people didn't want to be caught outside if they didn't have to be.

Effectively, the curfew reduced the reports, the attacks, and the fear, though there were still a few here and there – perhaps from desperate nobodies wanting to claim a semblance of relevance? I'm unsure. Even to this day, when people go missing (usually younger people, or those who had been the subject of some trivial scandal or other) would still have the odd person

believe it was the Burnt Man, rather than them escaping in to anonymity, or relocating to a bigger city where opportunity was rife.

When it all died down, that's when the aforementioned tales took full force. It was as if in the absence of imminent danger, people actually missed it. The stories either intended to keep people vigilant, or they had a sick intrigue, like me, in to what awakened a sleeping town.

"It was the farmer's illegitimate son," was a strong claim. "The man tried to burn him alive as a lad, so he ran away, grew up, and got revenge."

"A demon," another story that the more spiritual and god-fearing championed. "Born from flames and cast out of hell because he was too evil, even by their standards."

"A psychopath from the asylum in the next town over," this I found most chilling in its plausibility. That asylum was renowned and had a horrid history. "An arsonist who burnt his family in a fit of madness, and his only way to sate the agony was subjecting others to the same fate."

Over the years, The Burnt Man has found himself join the Halloween rostra. I've seen kids knock at doors in their little groups, some as witches, vampires, werewolves and Frankensteins – and then one wearing a top hat with orange ribbons dangling down, and a thin mask that covered most of the face. Any flesh left visible painted pink and raw.

It's also become a tradition in the town that on the day the bodies were found, people will take old clothes, fill them with hay, much like the Guy Fawkes tradition on bonfire night – and burn them. An offering to keep the demon/bastard/psycho at bay. It's actually surprisingly festive, and even the adults will join, dress up, share drinks. They love to watch the kids scream with feigned terror, watch the blooming fireworks colour the night sky and trade their favourite Burnt Man tale to friends who have heard them a million times already, or listen to the older generation who "saw him once, heading toward the forest," or introducing children to the terror of their town.

It's odd to feel proud of something so grim, isn't it?

But, if all you had for an attraction was an oddly shaped boulder excavated from the coal mine, perhaps you too would take pride in the insidious!

I've found the effect of the Burnt Man has infected people in different ways. Especially when it comes to the annual burning. It's as if the horror himself is famous, equally treasured, revered and feared. The amount of women I've seen chatting to the men wearing more impressive costumes, and giggling, chatting, even screaming with laughter as the man would grab them around the waist and pretend their intention is to throw them on the pyre. I guess we all like that danger, because it reminds us that we're lucky to be alive.

I must admit, too. I've taken advantage of dressing up, sharing drinks and using the fable to win some attention from others. Most even love when I commit myself to the character completely – a roleplay of sorts.

Though, I must say, my favourite thing about the tales, the legends, the horror and sick excitement...

Is they all make the sheer look of terror on the next victim's face, when I take off the mask to reveal my flame-contorted flesh, all the more potent.