

NO SMOKING. (Unknown author)

The fields stretched away flat to the horizon. It was dawn.  
Ben stood at the bedroom window, Karen's cup of tea in his hand.  
He wondered if he should mention the smoke to her.

They'd rented the house for three months while they looked for something more permanent.  
Ben had just returned from teaching in Hong Kong to a research post in Cambridge.  
Actually the house was two old farm-labourer's cottages knocked into one.  
The agency claimed it was seventeenth century---it certainly had atmosphere.

Ben handed Karen her tea, then tip toed to the cradle in the corner, where three month old Jason lay fast asleep. He decided he must mention it now.

"I don't know if it's my imagination, but I smelt tobacco smoke during the night."

"You must have been dreaming, darling" she said "neither of us smokes and the nearest house is at least two hundred yards away."

"No, I didn't dream it" he said "And this wasn't the first time. I've smelt it at least three times now."

They agreed that, if it happened again he would wake her.

The next night he woke at two thirty.  
The tobacco smell was there again.  
He gently woke Karen.

"There. Can you smell it now?" he whispered. "It smells like some old brand; you know the sort that people used to roll their own cigarettes."

"You're right. I can smell it. It's almost as if someone was in the room with us!"  
Ben felt the hair on the back of his neck prickling.  
They both got up and went to the cradle.  
The smell of the tobacco was stronger there.  
On impulse, Karen picked up Jason and took him back to bed with her.

"We've got to do something Ben. I'm frightened."

Shortly afterwards Karen mentioned the night smoker to the old vicar, who'd come visiting his new parishioners.

"Hmm. Very strange." He said "Of course your bedroom is part of the house where Jem Sykes used to live. Tragic really. He volunteered for the 1914-18 war. He was gassed at Loos in 1915. His wife went mad when she heard. They had a small baby too. One night she smothered it, then hanged herself. Very sad story. Jem was always smoking. He used to roll his own. You can't buy the sort of tobacco he smoked any more. I wonder..."

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That night Karen put up “No Smoking” notices all round the house.

“I can’t think what else to do” she said as they fell into an uneasy sleep.

It was 3a.m. when Ben woke.

The tobacco smell was there---stronger than ever.

He felt there was another presence in the room.

He got up and walked to the cot where Jason was sleeping peacefully.

Without thinking what he was doing, he began to talk to the invisible presence.

“It must have been terrible for you” he began “You must have loved your child, just as we love ours. I know you don’t mean to harm Jason. I hope you’ll go on watching over him for us. But there’s just one thing: I wonder if you could manage not to smoke in the house? We’re afraid it may affect Jason’s health. Do you mind? But please come as often as you like.”

Ben did not remember getting back into bed.

In the morning he wondered if his ‘conversation’ had been a dream.

But that night there was no tobacco smell in the house.

“Thank you,” said Ben, as he kissed Jason goodnight “I knew you’d understand.”