

When your prince turns into a phrog

The idea of someone living secretly in your house seems absurd, but a spurned lover has been jailed for the crime, writes Thomas W Hodgkinson

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In the film *Shallow Grave*, Christopher Eccleston spies on his ex-flatmates from the attic

IT ALL began when a pizza went missing from the fridge. At first, Marie Wright accused her housemate of the theft. But then a packet of cigarettes and some lavatory paper vanished, too. Finally Wright, a 28-year-old sales manager from Sheffield, noticed that money had mysteriously been spent on her credit card and she started to suspect something more sinister.

The culprit turned out to be her boyfriend, Alexander Cooper, 27, who had come into her life via the dating website Plenty of Fish. After he had stayed with her, at her invitation, for a few weeks, she had asked him to move out, saying she needed “space”. That is when Cooper decided he would occupy her loft. When Wright and her housemate explored the

loft Cooper was out. But they found a makeshift bed among the rafters, and a bag of his clothes. It turned out he had been there for more than two weeks. Last month, Cooper was jailed for 16 months after admitting theft, fraud and perverting the course of justice.

Apart from the creepiness of this tale — as Wright commented, “It was like a horror movie” — what struck me most when I read about the case last week was how much it resembled a novel I had written. The only difference was the ingenuity of the antiheroes. Cooper lasted a fortnight; his behaviour was reckless, doomed to be detected. Wright says the trapdoor to her attic was covered (can you believe it?) in dirty fingerprints. In my book, *Memoirs of a Stalker*, the main character lives secretly in his ex-girlfriend’s house for months.

There is a word for this behaviour. It is known as “phrogging” — thought to derive from the way culprits like to hop from pad to pad. And Cooper is not the first to have tried it. In 2012, in South Carolina, a woman named Tracy found she was being phrogged by an ex-boyfriend she had not seen in 12 years. She was in her bedroom when she had the prickly-scalp sensation that “something wasn’t right”. “Then all the nails just popped out of the ceiling over my bed,” she said. “Like ‘bing, bing, bing’. I thought there was some poltergeist stuff going on.”

But it was no ghost. When Tracy and her sons investigated, they found her ex, who had just finished a long prison sentence, asleep in the heating unit. On waking up, the 5ft 6in man scarpered. He had made a hole in the ceiling vent so he could look down on Tracy in the bedroom. He had been there — like Cooper — for about two weeks.

Not all real-life phroggers have been as cackhanded as Cooper or the convict from South Carolina. In 2008 a news report told of a man in Japan who had found a homeless woman living in the upper compartment of his wardrobe. Apparently, she had been there for a year. The secret of her success, one police officer said, was that she had been very “neat and clean”.

Yet for my money, if you are looking for the all-time greatest phrogger, you have to go back to Colorado in 1941. That was when a diminutive 59-year-old down-and-out named Theodore Edward Coneys took up residence in a tiny ceiling cupboard in the house of an elderly acquaintance, Philip Peters, who had refused to help him out. Peters was away most days, visiting his wife in hospital. While he was out Coneys would use the bathroom and take crumbs of food before crawling back into his hidey-hole. That was until one day, when he thought Peters had gone, but the old man was merely taking a nap. Coneys pushed open his cupboard door and began clattering about in the kitchen.

Waking up, Peters was horrified to discover Coneys, and struck at him with his stick. The unwanted guest grabbed a heavy flatiron and beat Peters until he stopped moving. Then Coneys climbed back into his cupboard.

When the police came, having been alerted by neighbours, they were presented with a mystery. A man lay dead on the living-room floor, but all the windows and doors were locked. It did not occur to them that the murderer might be lurking behind a wall just a few feet away. The door to his hiding place looked, at a glance, too small for a man to climb through.

In due course, Mrs Peters returned home and recommenced living there. But her housekeeper became convinced the house was haunted and insisted they move away. Months passed and neighbours reported seeing signs of activity in the supposedly empty house. A police officer eventually spotted a face at a window. Racing into the house, he was in time to catch a glimpse of a pair of legs disappearing into the cupboard. Coneys was still there. He was eventually convicted of murder and died in prison in 1967.

I first got the idea for *Memoirs of a Stalker* a few years ago, after discovering a mouse was living with me in my little flat in Chiswick, west London. It made me think. We assume we know whom we are living with, but we forget about mice, which are always there, hidden behind the skirting board and coming out only when we are away.

So I found myself wondering if a man could pull off a similar trick. He is bigger, obviously, which makes it more difficult. But as Coneys proved, it is not impossible.