

Fear Factor: Closet Edition

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Peering into your home's heart of darkness isn't always pretty

It's a little-known fact that whoever coined the phrase "out of sight, out of mind" also invented the closet. During a weekend visit to my parents' house, my daughter and two nieces were out of sight much of the time, rummaging around in the closets of the house where my seven siblings and I grew up. We adults didn't mind at all. Little did we know that the preteen girls' idea of fun was about to expose the sordid underbelly of our parents' house — its heart of darkness — the dense junky jungle that lurks within.

After dinner the girls insisted that we gather round the television to watch what they'd been doing — videotaping their own episodes of Fear Factor, the NBC reality show that pits contestants against creepy crawlies, stomach-churning stunts and each other. Lacking Southern California scenery for their stunts, they had used the next best thing — my parents' neglected closets.

Penetrating deep into the netherworlds of the sprawling house, the girls boldly went places the rest of us avoid at all cost, devising contests that tested their skill, speed and bravery, as well as their impressively cliched reality-show patter, tough and sultry chick swagger, and, most improbably, pitch-perfect Joe Rogan imitations: "IN THREE, TWO, ONE — GO!"

A typical stunt involved finding yellow flags hidden in an unlit, dingy closet and bringing them out one by one to a chair outside. The furnace-closet episode was my favorite. Our fearless contestants had two minutes to locate and retrieve all the flags in that creepy, dilapidated place — a place the boogeyman has bunked in — a place I've been scared to go into for 30 years, even with the lights on.

Seeing video of the girls racing into the gloomy greenish glow of the night-vision-enhanced furnace room, sticking their hands into piles of tattered, old wallpaper, bumping into mountains of dusty cardboard boxes, reaching around hideous furniture into the cobwebbed abyss in search of yellow flags and glory, I marveled at their courage. Had they not heard about the snakeskins, the mice, the spiders? Evidently, fear was not a factor for them.

As the episodes continued, our contestants moved to other unkempt closets in rarely used bedrooms. Even as the assembled audience applauded the girls' ingenuity and toughness, my mother's face froze into a horrified expression, and it wasn't out of concern for her granddaughters' safety. She wasn't seeing yellow flags. She was seeing what the yellow flags were attached to. All that shabby debris there on the television screen for all to see — cartons of her apartment-dwelling children's crap, boxes of her husband's baggage — it wasn't hers, but it was in her house. The horror! The horror!

Not being the adventurous type, my mother hadn't ventured into some of these closets for years. Now their contents were no longer out of sight and mind. That mattress, its stains visible even in

night vision, still there. Trash bags my brother wouldn't dare dump in his own home, still there. Those cobweb-encased ship models, those crates of someone's college papers and that staple of every horror movie, a cradle, still there. It was frightening.

The thrill of the closets was gone. Every episode's underlying theme was this: Look at how much solid waste comes from raising eight children and not insisting that they clean up after themselves. To give this stuff away, you have to admit you have it and then imagine someone would want it. That's quite a leap. To throw it away, you have to admit your home has been a dump for 20 years. It was so depressing.

My mother got up off the sofa. She couldn't take it anymore. Those ties that bind can get to be a stranglehold sometimes. It was going to be up to her to clear out that junk, and she was feeling defeated before the task had even started. She was psyched out; you see it a lot on reality shows.

In reality she's up against a formidable competitor — my father. He's set the bar very high. Underneath the basement stairs is a closet even the fearless girls hadn't dared go into. Inside he has thrown dozens of grocery bags brimming with every check he has written in his 75 years. Any suggestion that a shredder might help is met with a growl. What fear is the factor there?

I'm not intimidated. Those girls inspired me. Up next — *Family Fear Factor: Basement Edition*. Mother/daughter vs. father/son. Bring it on.