

The Room Below

by Matt Kang

I was there for only one fall while I was finishing up school. At midnight, I closed my eyes to the sound of my girlfriend's snores. I took my deep breaths in and out and I opened my eyes. I took a big exhale, and opened the door of my apartment to leave for class. Then I would work out; then maybe sit alone in silence and wonder about the world and how it works and how I fit in.

Every night, I walked up the creaky staircase, then passed doors to my own. I pressed my key into the lock, hoping it turned. When it didn't, I rapped on the door softly for my girlfriend, so I didn't piss off my large, angry neighbor that wore Timberlands. A squeak of surprise behind the door, soft rumbles echoed, and she would thrust the door open and say "I know, the deadbolt! Sorry!" And I always would reply "Don't worry, baby," even though my mind always became a smokestack.

One night, I walked up the creaky staircase, then passed doors to my own. I pressed my key into the lock, hoping it turned. When it didn't, I rapped on the door softly for my girlfriend, so I didn't piss of my large, angry neighbor that wore Timberlands.

But no squeak of surprise came from behind the door. I pressed my ear against the door. I heard no soft rumbles. No apologies. I rapped harder. Nothing. Jiggled the doorknob, nothing. I rinsed and repeated until I was kicking the bottom of the door in triplet notes.

I walked down the creaky staircase, then passed an open door not my own. An invisible hand closed the door quickly on my passing. I walked out the building door, looking at the buzzer buttons and trying to remember my girlfriend's last name. This was awful. McGlone? McGibb? Why, oh why, were there two Mc-Gs living in the same damn building?

I heard a sound close behind me, and I jumped. I turned and saw a young boy, imperceptibly dark in the night, sniffing, his back turned exactly towards me. He had on a white hoodie with a shoulder-over-chest design of a dragon. His arms were raised to his eyes, rubbing out quick tears.

Sparing him any embarrassment (I was a kid once), I made to pretend I didn't see him, and with artificial confidence pressed McGibb. No answer. Again I pressed. Nothing.

I went out further into the parking lot, looking back at the kid every couple steps, and lit a cigarette. Before the first ashes fell from the end, the boy stole inside. I followed him inside, making sure he got in alright. Pretending I was going back upstairs to my room.

I walked back up the creaky staircase. On the small balcony I heard scrapes and a pounding on the door. A door was thrust open.

The voice that opened the door was deep. "You took it upon yourself to leave the house. Get inside the damn house, now."

"Please, daddy. Can you do it I while I sleep? Please? Do it while I'm sleeping?"

"Oh, I'm going to do it. I will." His voice was resolute, like a whip.

"Please daddy." It was more a groan than a voice.

The closed door swallowed up both voices, and all I could make out afterward were muffled pleas and angry answers that died completely.

I stood there silently on the balcony. After quiet settled the halls, I turned around and rapped on the door. Finally, to my internal acclaim, she answered the door.

When she went to the bathroom, I dived into her purse. McGlone.

At midnight, I closed my eyes to the sound of my girlfriend's snores. I took my deep breaths in and out and I opened my eyes.

