

The Upstairs Apartment

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It was a dank, coal night over Philadelphia. There was a smoky cloud cover pushing the sky's ceiling lower to the crumbled chimney tops of the far east side. There were only barking dogs and an occasional spattering of rancid rain on the graffiti-filled sidewalks, where the weedy cracks became a jungle of their own.

Sitting on the brownish-green banks of Byberry Creek was a large warehouse owned by a Mr. Townsend, a man who cared more for the products in his warehouse—even the warehouse itself—than the people who worked there. He was a stout man who wore a suit everyday, but the look was ruined by the coffee stain on his tie that he got while drinking his morning cup in the car. His one bushy eyebrow was always tense, making the hairs stand straight out from his face. As for facial expression, Mr. Townsend wore a glare all the time unless his end of the month report was exceptionally good.

That night Mr. Townsend came to oversee an extensive project and found a young man asleep in the otherwise empty conference room. Jake, an exhausted college student, had rubbed his fingers raw in assembly work. He was pale from the stress of classes during the day and late work nights.

Mr. Townsend grabbed Jake by the collar, shoved him against the chalkboard and spoke in a low, fierce voice, "I don't need lazy kids like you taking away from my profits!"

Jake's eyes blazed with anger and hurt; this wasn't the first time Townsend had harassed his overworked

employees. Jake had worked there for two years, always the late shift, no benefits, no credit, no time off. In the past year he had seen four good workers who supported large families forced to leave because of small infractions that Townsend wouldn't tolerate.

That night, after everyone left, Jake doused the boiler room with gas from the company pump out back, cracked the back door open, and lit a newspaper. He left the paper at the back door and ran. By the time the paper's flames had ignited the gas, Jake was several blocks away on a deserted street.

The next day Jake found out that Mr. Townsend had been in the building; he died in the blaze, trying to put out the flames himself in order to save his life's work and profits. Although no one would suspect him, Jake decided he would move away. After making his decision, he smothered the event in his heart.

Jake dropped his two Samsonite bags and fumbled around in his pocket for the key. The wooden sign to the left of the door said 902 1/2 Fuller Road, his new home. After opening the door and toting in the bags, he looked around the small upstairs apartment. The first thing he noticed was the yellow glow of the November sunset melting through the large west window. It was the only window in the apartment, having ten square panes but no screens or cranks to open it.

Beneath the window was an accordion-shaped heater that was stained a brownish-pink where a previous occupant must have dried clothes in the winter. This was the only heat source, but the room seemed warm enough.

The room was both a living room and kitchen,

containing a gas stove, small table, green side-by-side refrigerator/freezer, overstuffed black chair, green and black plaid couch, and a corner bookshelf which was missing a leg and leaning against the wall. To the left was a door leading to a bathroom that smelled of lime. Walking around by the couch, Jake spotted another door, this one leading to the bedroom. The sleeping area was only four paces wide and long, but the closet was spacious. He retrieved his bags and unpacked what he had brought. The rest of his possessions would be arriving tomorrow by truck.

Jake was in his playpen pounding a plastic ball against the cardboard-like bottom. His mother left the room to check on dinner when a frayed, electrical lamp cord behind the playpen suddenly popped. The television being on, she didn't hear anything. The pen's plastic weave melted in the flames; Jake stared at the bright sparks, mesmerized by them. His mother discovered the fire, snatched him up, and put it out before he was hurt.

Jake had been trying to flip eggs for his mother when the grease scorched his small hand. He tried once more with the plastic spatula and again the grease popped, but this time in his face, turning several spots on his face and chin red.

Angrily he slid the pan of the burner and threw it across the kitchen and into a cabinet. He ran out the back door and didn't return for several hours, even when he heard his mother yelling, "Jake, c'mon honey! Nothin's

been hurt...come home Jake!"

In junior high Jake was harassed by Leech, an older boy who flunked the seventh grade twice. Jake managed to stay away from him by ducking around corners or by standing by teachers in the hall. But, one day when Jake was using the restroom, Leech stood in front of the stall so that Jake could see the boy's muddy tennis shoes. An orange ash fell from Leech's cigarette: it burned a brown spot on his right rubber-soled toe. As soon as Jake reservedly pushed the metal latch to the side to unlock it, Leech slammed the door open, smiled self-confidently, and blew a puff of the choking smoke into Jake's face. Leech pinned Jake's head against the gritty cement wall so that Jake was straddling the toilet seat. Slowly Leech inched the cigarette closer to Jake's cheek. Just as Jake could feel the small circle of heat, he kicked Leech in the knee making the bully fall back and allowing Jake to escape.

Jake had been sent out to burn the trash. He carried two brown grocery sacks in both arms and the matches in his fingers. He dumped the load into the rusty can. The black and white ashes floated up to his nostrils then fluttered away in the breeze. He lit the bags and watched the fire engulf them. Seeing a branch nearby, he picked it up and stuck it into the fire, so that the end glowed. He took the tip and made an X on the ruddy barrel, the writing turning the barrel a flaky black. He then wrote his name on the barrel and threw the stick into the now glowering pot of embers.

A very tall, stocky woman was sitting at her kitchen table talking on the telephone. She was the landlady of the three upstairs apartments, one of which was Jake's. Her husband, who was equally as large, was also at the table smoking a generic cigarette and reading *People*. Although he told her to get off the phone, she replied she never saw her friends so she had to phone them. Putting the magazine down and grinding the cigarette out, he muttered under his breath that her "friends" didn't want to see her.

"...Judy, I rented that upstairs apartment today! And only a month after it happened. Uh huh...yeah. He's a young guy from Philadelphia, probably doesn't know a thing about it...yeah. Well, if he doesn't know, I'm sure not gonna tell him. I'd never be able to rent the apartment again since it happened. Funny, he looks so much like Rick, yeah, uh huh..."

Once the trucks had been brought up to the apartment, Jake followed the sweaty delivery man back to the truck and paid him. It was a bright morning; the sky was a crystalline aqua, void of clouds. But when Jake returned to the room to unpack, the place felt extremely dingy, which seemed strange considering the window was still curtainless and all the lights were on. Jake went to the panes and saw the sun's blazings washing a windshield in the street below, yet it couldn't penetrate his room. He shrugged. The apartment simply needed a good cleaning and some personality to brighten it.

In Detroit a brown-clad garbage man stooped over to pick up and dump the two tin cans on the corner of Schaefer Street and McNichols Road. The wind blew yesterday's afternoon paper, which the man grabbed before it blew into a muddy puddle. On the front was an article, "Unidentified Person Burns Dog; Kills One." A person had allegedly poisoned a German shepherd, presumably his own, dumped the body in a private garage, and drenched the place with kerosene. The fire burned down the garage and the adjoining house, killing one sleeping occupant. Charges are being filed by the husband of the victim.

The garbage man crumpled the ink-smearred paper as he climbed into the truck; Rick watched him pull away and went back to his packing. He was going to St. Louis and would rent an apartment there until the heat was over.

Jake detected a strange smell in the main room, close to the heater, but not in the other rooms. As he poked and checked the heater for any lodged items, he tried to describe the smell. It was smoke and singed hair. Not finding anything but a very small pile of a few black hairs, Jake made a mental note to buy an air freshener.

That night Jake plugged in his radio and rolled the dial clear across to find a good local news station so that he could find out more about St. Louis. Once he found one, he went to the bathroom to shower. More than anything, he had turned it on to fill up the lonely apartment with something other than his breathing.

"...and the latest on the Rooker murder...Reports about the man who was murdered in an upstairs apartment on Fuller Road are still inconclusive. The mysterious event involved a man who was completely burned yet the building sustained no physical damage..."

By the end of the week, Jake's apartment was settled, yet it was still dark. There never seemed to be any light during the day, but around twilight, a glowing yellow light poured through the west window. Jake was more concerned about the heater, though, because each day the apartment grew a little warmer. But Jake never turned on the heater, and to his knowledge he'd never heard any clinking, clunking, or whirring from it. When he talked to Mrs. McCauley about it, she had her husband examine it. Nothing appeared wrong.

Annoyed, Jake asked about the lighting. She replied that as long as the bulbs worked, she wouldn't do anything about it.

Jake set out for the People's down the street. After he walked in, the teenaged cashier ran in to the back room, emerging with a middle aged, balding man. Jake peripherally looked at the two who stared at him. He picked up two boxes of GE bulbs and slid his fingertips over the packages. He wondered if they knew about him. Walking to another aisle, he picked up the first air freshener

he saw and then casually approached the counter. As he reached into his back pocket of his jeans for his wallet, the girl looked between Jake and the man while ringing up the order, not sure of what to say. The man stared. As Jake grabbed the bag to leave, she asked him, "Hey, uh, do you happen to be any relation to Rick Rooker? You could be his twin!"

"Uh, no. Does he live here in St. Louis?" Jake asked, relieved that they were not on to him.

Both the girl and the man paled. She spoke quietly, "Rick was killed in a fire a month ago. He used to work here. You just look so much like him...except that you have blond hair and he had black.

Jake didn't know what to say, so he just nodded his head sympathetically. Seeing that the conversation was over, he left the store.

That night as Jake was putting the bulbs up, he pulled out the fixture in the main room. Remembering that he had a tool box in the bedroom closet, he decided to fix it himself rather than wait for Mrs. McCauley's husband to do it.

Once in the closet, he moved around a few unpacked boxes. The box with the tools was on the bottom under the box with the miniature Christmas tree his mother had sent. As he lifted the boxes, he found an old cedar jewelry case, delicately carved on the top. It was the size of a legal pad and about two inches deep. There was no latch or lock, but a frayed rope hung loosely around it. Puzzled at how he could have missed it while unpacking, he took it out to the main room.

It must have belonged to the person who lived there

before. Although Jake didn't consider himself a snoop, he wanted to identify and return it. He gently lifted the heavy lid.

The inside was lined with a musty smelling, orange velvet. In the case was a picture, face down with some writing on the back. As Jake reached for it, the room swelled and crackled with insane heat. He looked around and then walked to the door. He opened it and stepped in to the hall. It felt cool, just right for November. The heat pouring from the room was suffocating.

He went back to the case and snatched the snapshot from the velvet coffin. He looked at a picture of himself, except the figure in the picture had jet black hair. Quickly flipping it, he read the back: Rick Rooker, age 22. He then saw the top edge of the picture glow, suddenly turning to flame. Jake threw it to the floor; a doom thickly enveloped his heart. He would die the same death as Rick! Although he'd never met Rick, Jake felt a surge through his veins and a curdled sweat broke out. He felt a bond.

He seized the door knob, trying to get away, violently turning it then jerking it in and out. It was oily so that he couldn't get a hold on it. The apartment would not let him escape. The west window glowed like orange crystal, the panes changing shades and intensity with every strained breath Jake took. The room was now filled with a gagging, almost visible humidity.

The heater spewed out embers that jumped out onto the carpet. Jake ran to the bedroom, found the tool box, and clutched the hammer. Jake didn't want to die; he had to fight. He charged the west window's mocking glare, his eyes ignited in anger. Just as he lunged at the panes, the heater vomited a sheet of fire tongues, throwing him back on the carpet and into a corner. He couldn't move; the room shrieked and pulsed with the orange, the orange...

He waited. The fire gradually ate its way to the corner he was in, crumpled, whimpering, knowing that he couldn't escape, just as Rick couldn't. Yes, he knew Rick now. The growing flames walled him in against the bookcase. He stared into the window as the flames walled him in against the bookcase. He stared into the window as the flames singed his hair.