

# The Intruder in My Home

By Crystal Li

The lights are off, and footprints lead to the house. The gait is awkward, and the bearer's weight sinks it into the mud. As I was in no rush to get where I was going, I tread and re-tread

the trail until the imprints lose their shape. No matter. It gives me time to wonder how much longer the intruder will be inside, among other things.

This house I will inherit from my mother is a testament to her resolve to cling to things that should really stay gone. My room in the attic was the cleanest. My mother could not climb the creaky stairs, and I inherited only one stiff leg. She always made sure I could hear her taunting me from her home in the kitchen, bathroom, and hallway in between. That was fine by

me, as I was too heavysset for her and could not fit in her walkways of moldy filth. No one should be surprised then, that it all caught fire. No one could enter because of the debris, but everyone

knew she had it coming. She survived, somehow. Survived and repaired, but try as she might, she still could not reach my attic. And she keeps trying.

She liked to poke and prod at our relationship. She was very good at kicking dead horses, and I always told myself I did not feel the kick. I know my mother is capable of love, because she is more forgetful of me in her old age, and she is more honest about her desire for affection. So, I bought her a gift of kitchen supplies and braved the whole walk there. The lights are on, and they invite me inside on her behalf.

I falter once in my careful march as I consider how muddy the backyard must be.

Regardless, I fall back in pace with a skip in my step. My feet feel lighter than the mud makes it seem. I reach for the key under the mat, push it into the intact lock, and enter – I suppose I'm home. That frantic fear turns

in my gut when I see the rubbish reaching for the sagging stairs and black bags wedged under the banisters. Every nerve screams in a cacophony at this intruder, whose pests writhe under my skin and willfully taint My Place in this life.

I reach into my bag and pull out my gift; I hesitate no longer. I slip the packaging carefully off the sharp edge and catch my tired eyes in the reflection. I find I have an easier time pushing through collectibles and broken furniture. I throw what I can into the path and bathroom behind me to obstruct it, and I hope the noise gets to her too. The hallway, for once, is clear enough to see the kitchen. A mattress surrounded by discoloured pillows lies on the floor, and I know it is still warm because I am watching her leave.

I am not in a rush. Her own home is blocked off, and she can only flee to Mine. The symphony of my childhood alerts me each time her knees bang against the wood and hands scratch for purchase. Up she goes on all fours and – oh. The creaking stops. Disbelief threatens to choke me, but I do not want to disturb this fleeting peace. How strangely happy I am, that she renovated my room as her first and final gift.

All is quiet and I try to think fondly. I think of a spot behind the house, a spot buried under old carpets and dirt and empty gas canisters. A spot no fireman nor mother or even insurance man checks. It would be a pain to finish digging before dawn, so I clear the white noise from my thoughts and welcome the creaking under my feet.