

Ruskin heard the thump on the roof. It disturbed his sleep and changed his dream channel to a weird 60's flashback of an experience he never had.

He opened one eye and looked at the ceiling. In the dark the mica in the mix glittered like stars, reflecting the streetlight he'd been trying to shoot out since he was 10.

Ruskin was 32. He was not a very good shot.

Thump.

Ruskin opened his other eye. He was reluctant to slide out of his Ruskin-shaped cocoon.

Thump.

Bitter cold fingers wrapped themselves around his ankle as he flung back the still warm blanket. His toes curled in protest when they met the icy floor. He thought, not for the first – or even the 100th – time that a small rug placed right where his feet landed every morning could be a good thing.

Ruskin sighed and looked around for the robe he wished he owned. He pulled the threadbare blanket he had recovered from the fire that engulfed his mother's house last year around his shoulders. Chilly fingers crept up his body and around his heart.

Ruskin plodded through the dark hallway to the top of the steps. Instead of going down, he turned right toward the tiny dormer window that was usually the only source of light on the dreary landing. He stopped and looked through the frosty glass pane. It occurred to him to wonder if the blanket of snow was

keeping the front yard any warmer than his frayed and smoky blanket was keeping him.

Thump.

He looked up. A light sprinkling of ceiling dust drifted toward him. He blinked his eyes and reached for the wooden bead that dangled from a moldy cord above his head. The attic stairs unfurled with a loud thwack. Ruskin jumped back. It had been a long time since he had stored his two boxes in the communal attic, and he'd forgotten how excited the stairs could get when they were finally released from their prison.

Ruskin grabbed the bottom rung just before it hit the floor. Ruskin understood.

Thump.

With the attic open, the noise was louder. Half of Ruskin quivered with excitement. The other half quaked in fear. He looked into the abyss above him and began to climb.

Thump, thump, thump.

Ruskin poked his head through the floor of the attic. The dust tickled his nose, and he tried hard not to sneeze. When that didn't work, he buried his head in the blanket cloaking his left shoulder. To him, alone in the half dark of the attic stairway, the noise was deafening. But whatever – or whoever – was up here didn't notice.

Thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump.

Suddenly there were too many to count. Ruskin spun in search of the intruders and nearly lost his footing on the narrow attic steps. He decided – against his own better judgment (alas, an argument he lost often) – that it might be less leg-breaking if he actually completed his climb. He took the top step and ducked his head into the rafters. He hadn't forgotten that part of his other visit. He reached out an inch or two and found the beam that had beamed him last time. He patted the splintery edge, making sure he was clear of it before he brought his other foot up to join the rest of him. He stood up, listening hard. Somewhere to his left, mice scrabbled about, skittering their tiny claws across the dusty floor. Ruskin batted the air, hoping to connect with the invisible light cord he knew was there. He batted too hard, surprised the string and felt it jump away from him into the darkness. Ruskin waited, hand raised, until the string returned, ready at last to do its job. With a light tug, the attic exploded into brilliant white. Ruskin blinked and waited till his eyes adjusted.

He looked around. His two boxes were right where he left them, alone and unopened for more than a year. Ever since the day he moved onto Mrs. Ferguson's third floor. Ruskin liked to think he chose the third, and top-most, floor of Mrs. Ferguson's house, but the truth is it chose him. The other two degenerates who occupied Mrs. Ferguson's halfway house were already in residence when Ruskin's mother's house burned down. The choice to move in across the street had not been hard. Mrs. Ferguson needed a renter. Ruskin needed a place to live – degenerates notwithstanding.

Before moving into Mrs. Ferguson's house, Ruskin had not considered

himself half way to anything. But he could never really recall being all the way anywhere either.

And now he was in the attic above his rented, degenerate, third floor room. He looked around. There was something slightly odd, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Ruskin took a step further into the attic. As he lifted one foot and held his breath, he realized what was so odd. He put his foot down carefully, hoping the ancient floorboards beneath him wouldn't protest his slight pudginess.

Now why had he come up here, he wondered. Ah yes, the thumping.

And that is what was odd. Now that he was here, the thumping was gone. A new noise had replaced it, but it was coming from below him.

The intruders were in the house!

Ruskin turned sharply and forgot to duck. For a moment the room dimmed and his boxes in the corner danced sideways. He shook his head and checked for blood. None. Good. Ruskin hated blood – especially when it was his own. He skidded down the attic steps and realized he had left the attic light on. Screw it. Mrs. Ferguson, den mother to degenerates, was in danger. Ruskin tried to shout as he bounced down the main stairway, but no sound came. He could hear his blood pounding in his ears. The banisters groaned as he used both sides to help him leap down three steps at a time. Ruskin rarely hurried, but this was exhilarating. In mid-leap he almost smiled, then his terror overtook him, and he hurried on.

Ruskin landed with his own great thump in the middle of the foyer by the big table where Mrs. Ferguson always left his mail. Ruskin rarely got mail. Once

or twice a month maybe a check from some government agency or other, and the occasional advert addressed to occupant that Mrs. Ferguson thought he might like to see. He caught the edge of the table and steadied himself while he caught his breath. He wondered why none of the other degenerates in residence were leaping and bounding about. But here on the lowest floor all was quiet. A nightlight glowed in the foyer to light the way should anyone be out past their usual time. But nothing stirred. Mrs. Ferguson's door behind the stairs was closed. He put his ear to it and could hear her rhythmic snoring, each breath punctuated with a tiny whistle and a grunt. Whistle and grunt. Whistle and grunt. Mrs. Ferguson clearly had not heard the commotion on her roof.

Ruskin wondered if he should call the police. His fellow renters would be none too pleased with him if he did. Although nothing was ever mentioned, Ruskin was pretty sure Damian had a record of some sort. And Patrick – well, Patrick was Patrick. Ruskin always felt it best to leave it at that. Tonight, even with all the excitement, neither Patrick nor Damian appeared.

Ruskin went from room to room, peering sharply into each one. Nothing moved. Nothing seemed to be missing. When he finished his peering and searching, he found himself at the foot of the stairs again. If the intruders were still here they were invisible. He gave one last look around and began his climb back to the third floor. With each step, he listened hard. But there was nothing. No noise, no thumping, no intruders. Ruskin reached the top step completely confused. He remembered to close the attic stairs before going back to his own private corner of the world.

But when he got to his door Ruskin stopped. He stared. He wondered. For on the floor, right where his feet landed every morning was a small brown fuzzy rug. He went over and stepped on it to make sure he wasn't just imagining things. It was soft and ticklish on his cold feet. And it was exactly where he'd always wished it would be. On the foot of the bed, draped across the rumpled covers was a blue robe. Ruskin picked it up and stuck one arm into a sleeve. It was warm, and slightly heavy on his skin. He put his other arm in. That side was warm, too. He wrapped the robe tight around him. Ruskin looked down at his feet on the fuzzy rug and smiled. He knew who the intruder was. With his robe still on, Ruskin went back to bed and fell fast asleep.