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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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Doorhammer

by Donald A. Wollheim

A quiet, disturbing tale which may make you wonder about familiar sounds heard at untoward times. The author regrets that this account is factually based only up to a point. It would be amusing to learn that the offices of a well-known publisher were haunted . . .

FROM SOMEWHERE down the darkened hall a door slammed.

I looked up from my papers, looked at Mr. Wilkins questioningly. It was ten thirty at night and I had supposed we were alone in the office, probably alone in the whole gigantic office building.

"The cleaning woman come back?" I queried. She had been in an hour ago, dusting and mopping and emptying the waste baskets. It was a disturbance and a distraction. We wanted to get the books straightened out and we needed peace and quiet to do it.

Wilkins shook his head. "It

was nothing. Let's get on with this."

I frowned, annoyed, went back to my ledgers. I finished four more pages, saw that the work was finished on this book. It wasn't going to be such a long job at that. I'd figured on being at the office until maybe one in the morning. I leaned back, looked up.

Wilkins looked up just then, caught my eye, smiled a bit. I saw he'd probably realized just how close we were to being through.

"I'm done with this one," I said. "Going to stretch my legs a bit." He watched me, said nothing. I got up, walked over to the water cooler at the door, took a drink, looked out into the dark corridor leading towards the editorial offices. I couldn't see what door had slammed. They were all shut, all the little cubbyholes at the far end, the ones with the view of the river from twenty stories up, the best offices reserved for the sensitive souls in Editorial — with the big brains and the lowest salaries.

I walked down the hall towards that end. It was dark and deserted, and there were no lights behind the chilled glass windows of the doors. It's eerie in an office building after hours, darned eerie. I came back. Wilkins had finished his ledger, was leaning back, lighting a cigarette.

"Nobody there," I said. "But somebody slammed a door before. I heard it. And there's no drafts."

He nodded soberly. "I know. I heard it too. Often hear it late at night like this. It's nobody. Only Alice."

"Alice?" I asked. "Thought you said we were alone. Is Alice the cleaning woman's name?"

He shook his head. "No, not Mrs. Flaherty. Just Alice . . . You remember."

I sat down. "Who're you kidding? I don't remember any Alice."

WILKINS LOOKED at me, took his cigarette out of his mouth. "Oh, that's right. You never knew her. You came after her time. Well . . . it's Alice, anyway. Alice Kingsley, I think was her name. Alice C. Kingsley. Mrs."

"So?" I said. "So this Alice is working here tonight. Why doesn't she come in and say hello? One of those stuck-up editors?"

"Alice isn't working here tonight," said Wilkins mildly. "She hasn't been working here for a couple of years. Not here. Not nowhere."

"So who are you talking about?" I asked, beginning to get a little piqued. "First you say Alice, then no — so what Alice is here now?"

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't know for sure. We

just think it's Alice. I mean the Kingsley girl. She was a knock-out too. A real looker."

For a moment he looked dreamy, as if thinking of some girl he'd maybe had an infatuation for. I could have knocked him on the head. "What are you handing me? Make sense, man. You're a hell of an accountant, sitting there like a goof dreaming of some girl."

He wasn't offended. "Yeah, I guess so. But Alice got us all that way. She was . . . well, you just couldn't look at her without thinking of blue skies and green fields, of Spring mornings and college campuses. She didn't belong in a city office. She was . . . well, she looked like a kid fresh from some rah-rah field."

"Uh huh," I said. "Does your wife know about the way you feel about this chick?"

"Ahh," he shook his head, "you won't believe it, but she wouldn't mind. Alice was that way. She was out of this world — I mean the big-city world. The women didn't seem to object to her. Somehow she just didn't seem to compete. She was in love, you see, and offered no rivalry. She was also may, nuts."

"Boy, what a picture you're building up. Sweet innocence, a knockout, lovely, but nuts. Come down to Earth, man." I sat down myself, glanced out at the dark corridor back over my shoulder.

He went on again, this time paying no attention to me, just talking.

"Alice was hired as an assistant editor to the short story department. She was fresh from college, somewhere in the Midwest, and she never lost that look. You don't find it often. She had the blackest hair and the fairest skin, and the brightest, shiniest eyes you ever saw.

"She was like a kid in many ways. Never seemed to have any mind for other folks. She was a door slammer. I remember a big fight she had the first week she was here. Slammed the door going out of Miss Burnside's office and boy, did that queen bee get sore. You know what a touchy old bat the boss' secretary is. You should have heard her give Alice the mouth. And Alice didn't answer back. Just looked at her like a child of twelve would look, sort of wide-eyed and wondering what kind of curious animal this was. Afterwards, Alice only remarked that Miss Burnside must be crazy.

"Fact is, we got to thinking that it wasn't Burnsy that was cracked. Alice just never learned some things. She'd step on people's toes and expect them to pardon her like they'd forgive a pretty brat. It took a while for us to learn. She never stopped slamming doors. Got so we all knew when she was around.

"YOU SHOULD HAVE seen the fellows try to date up Alice. Not one of them got to first base. She just seemed so darned innocent and starry that nothing impressed her. Later, we found out why. She was married, you see. Still loved her husband. He was some fellow she'd met in college, married there.

"We envied him until we found out that one day he'd run off, just skipped out, vanished. That was the day Alice graduated. She came home with her diploma, in that college town to the boarding house they were living in, and he'd gone. Left no notice, just went. Quit.

"Alice went home to her folks — I think they're Des Moines people — threw a wingding, was laid up, left town, came to New York, got a job. Here. She was brilliant, but there was always something . . .

"It's hard to explain to a fellow who never saw her. You'd be amazed at what she could get away with. None of her bosses — the men that is — could get mad at her. She did her work too well for that, yet she never seemed to be present in spirit. I think they were afraid she'd quit if they pressed her too hard to learn some manners. Having her around was a pleasure — just to see that Springlike air. You

don't find it around the city, you just don't.

"But there was something else, though. I remember once going down in the elevator with her, and with Joe Simpkins, her boss, the short story editor, you know. She never said goodnight to us, just brushed past and walked off down the street, her brow a little puzzled as if wondering herself what she was doing here away from the green fields. Joe and I walked a block watching her, and then Joe turned to me and said, 'You know, I keep saying to myself that Alice is as nutty as fruit cake. I keep thinking it every once in a while. It sort of bothers me.'

"I knew what he meant, too. Exactly what he meant. Anyway, Alice was with the firm about six months and everybody loved her and everybody knew when you heard a door slam, it was just Alice going somewhere.

"Miss Burnside never forgave her. They had another fight one afternoon and Burnside gave it to her good. Told her she should wake up and stop acting like a spoiled brat. Burnside said something else, too. Said she could understand how her husband would walk out on her."

Wilkins stopped, frowned to himself in thought, lit another cigarette. "Alice took it from her without really listening, her usual trick. But the next day it

seemed to bother her, because she actually took to closing doors gently. It amazed us all.

"And then one morning, about eleven, the door slammed — violently. Alice was off again, we thought, but we didn't know the whole of it.

"Joe Simpkins told us at lunchtime. He said Alice was very upset. It seems she'd read a manuscript that morning, some short story in the mail unsolicited pile. Something about a guy that fell in love only to find a mirage. Typical college young-love sort of yarn. We saw afterwards who wrote it. Some fellow in California. Last name was Kingsley.

"Alice didn't do much work that afternoon. Just seemed to forget every now and then and sort of visit. She'd drop in on the other readers, sort of stand around vacantly, just sort of dreamy, then breeze out, slamming the door behind her. We were getting real sore after an afternoon of that and Joe swore if she didn't stop it, he'd have to do something. Maybe get rid of her, fire her. Good as she was, he couldn't have people being disrupted.

"He didn't have to fire her though. The door of her own office slammed around four o'clock. When it was half past five and the other girls were leaving, someone looked in and her office was empty and the window open.

"Yeah, it was in the papers. There was quite a funeral, too. She had quite a mob of young fellows there. Nobody ever suspected them, but I think they couldn't help themselves. She was a sort of dream, a dream of sun and fleecy white clouds such as you somehow don't get with city girls. I didn't go myself. They kept the coffin closed.

"Anyway, that was two years ago. Alice made an impression on people that lasted. Nobody that knew her can ever quite get over her. And maybe things feel the same way. We got door trouble in this office, late at night or on quiet afternoons. Nobody pays any attention to it any more."

I looked at him, thinking to myself that he was really going in the deep end. You wouldn't believe he could be such a matter-of-fact, adding and subtracting machine accountant. There was something in his eyes, something perplexed, lit up and yet maybe a little pained.

"Well, enough of this. Let's get this work cleaned up. I want to get home tonight." Wilkins shoved another ledger at me, opened up the other remaining one, and we bent over our tasks again.

Somewhere down the hall a door slammed. I looked up, caught Wilkins' eye. He shrugged.

"It's nothing. Just Alice."