**Liu**

*Norman Yeung*

"Oh. Hi boys!" It's Mr. Liu at the door. He's holding two pizzas.  
  
Mr. Liu, the first to arrive and the last to leave. Gotta get to the boiler room early, heat up the school so the four hundred kids don't get frostbitten while jamming their lunch boxes into cubby holes. Gotta take out the big folding rolling tables at 11.34AM, set them up in the gym so the kids can eat their lunch at 12. He was more important than simply being our janitor, more valuable than being our custodian. Even his glorified title of "Engineer" couldn't match his worth, no. He occupied a privileged position between student and teacher. He could neither scold us nor grade us. He was sympathetic and reliable. Mr. Liu was our pal. He was our daily smile.  
He never looked angry or perplexed. He was always grinning and cool, and our school worked because of him. Whenever we walked by his boiler room -- the door was always open -- we wanted to run inside, run away from spelling class, hang out with him. But the boiler room was creepy. It rumbled.

I met the slight, gangly man with pronounced cheekbones in Grade Two. He was with us all my elementary years. Maybe he was 33, but to a 10-year-old he might as well be 53. It didn't matter -- Mr. Liu was timeless. We didn't know how long he'd been in this country, but not forever long. We could tell because of his accent. We knew he had at least two kids, one a baby the other a toddler. We knew this because his wife brought their kids to visit him one day. They're all Chinese. They stood outside the boiler room. His kids were too young to go to school but one day they would. They probably wouldn't go to our school because their dad works there, and going to school where your dad's the janitor is pretty damn right embarrassing.  
  
And that's all we knew about Mr. Liu. ...Also, he stayed way after school to lock up the dozens of doors. And that's all we knew about Mr. Liu.  
  
Now he's standing outside Fab's door cradling an extra-pepperoni and a Hawaiian. It's our Saturday 3PM pizza party and we're watching *Johnny Be Good* on Beta. We're watching our hero Anthony Michael Hall and some weird guy named Robert Downey Jr. getting college yuks around some strange-hot girl called Uma Thurman and we're hungry and we want pizza and  
"Mr. Liu!"  
"Mr. Liu!"  
"What the hell are you doing here, Mr. Liu?" Fab shouldn't swear like that. His home is Catholic.  
"Hi boys!" Mr. Liu's not wearing either of his two uniforms: blue stained coveralls; jeans and plaid shirt rolled up at the knotty elbows. He's wearing a decidedly uncustodian windbreaker.  
"Why are *you* here?" asks Nick.  
"I was in neighbourhood," says Mr. Liu.  
"Do you live around us?" I ask.  
"No no no no no..."  
"Then why are you here?"  
"You boys order pizza, yes?" Mr. Liu says with an effortful grin.  
"Why are *you* delivering *pizza*?" squeaks Fab. "Are you poor?"  
Mr. Liu licks his lips. "Hahaha! I just helping out friend." He chuckles again.