DOORWATCH

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FOR BREAKFAST, Ned had a single egg and a slice of toast. It was not a big meal, but for years now, big meals had caused him great distress. If he wanted to get through the day without pain, breakfast had to be small enough to circumvent the dyspeptic demon policing his innards. While eating, he perused the morning newspaper, clucking his tongue at the escalating accounts of global and societal decay, and scanning the obituaries to see who he'd outlived. Here was poor Mrs. Jones from around the corner, claimed by ovarian cancer. There was Bob Miller, the mayor of nearby Easterbrook, felled by a heart attack while overseeing the construction of a new wing of the local library. At seventy-six, Ned supposed it wouldn't be long before his own name appeared in one of those little boxes, but the thought was too morbid to linger. Besides, he had work to do. With a small sigh of resignation, he put on his jacket, and headed out into the backyard to start his day.

There was a chill, but not enough to make him regret not wearing his duffel coat. The nylon jacket would do well enough should it decide to rain, a development the dirty sky seemed to be considering.

His yard was not large, the right size for a man who'd never had children or a dog, and for the most part, it looked the same as all the other yards attached to all the other houses on Beech Avenue, where he'd lived since marrying Gretchen in the fall of 1982. The world had changed a lot since then, mostly for the worse, in Ned Barrow's opinion, the *very* worst change being the appearance of his beloved wife's name in those obituaries four years ago when, with no warning at all, she went to sleep next to him and didn't wake up. The other change was the appearance of the door at the end of his yard where once there had only been a low hedge separating his lot from the alley that ran between his house and the Radcliffes'. Whereas Gretchen had been there and then wasn't, the door hadn't been there and then was, and neither development had pleased him, though he could have lived easier with the latter than the former.

The door was tall and heavy and paneled and painted jet black. It stood without a wall to hold it up and was not visible from the alley. Not because anything was in the way. It just wasn't there when you looked at it from that angle. Nor could it be seen from the sides. It existed only when you sat before it, and that's why the red chair was there. It was a simple wooden chair, much like the one he had at the kitchen table, only his was white (or used to be). Painted on the seat was a six-fingered white hand. Each finger was of equal length, and there was an open black eye in the middle of the palm.

Shuddering off the infiltration of the chill, Ned took a seat, crossed his legs, and watched the door, same as he had every day since the door first appeared. This was his job. Nobody had instructed him to do it. Nobody had ever said a word. If the neighbors on both sides of his house noticed the door, they had never let on. Perhaps only *he* saw it. Perhaps he'd gone mad. He didn't know, but it hardly made much difference, because Ned knew he must watch the door to make sure nothing came out. This information hadn't been passed down to him from some spectral higher power. He'd received no instructions or correspondence at all. He'd simply emerged from his home one fine autumn morning, saw the door and the chair, and immediately knew what had to be done, so he did it. It had come as an automatic impulse, like putting your hands out to break your fall.

That was two years ago, and since then he'd never doubted the importance of this task because he knew if he didn't do it, something might sneak through that door and do something terrible. To whom, he didn't know, but that was unimportant too. Only the job mattered, not the whos and whys of it all.

One day a police officer poked his head over the hedge, three feet from the door he clearly couldn't see. He looked concerned.

"Hello, sir," he said.

"Hello," Ned replied.

"Everything all right?"

"I think so. Just watching the door."

The policeman squinted at the back door to Ned's house, some twenty feet behind where he sat.

"Not that one," Ned said.

"Which one then?"

Ned nodded at the air in front of his face. "This one here."

Irritation scrunched the policeman's face. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"No. You asked me what I was doing, and I told you."

"There's no door there."

"Yes there is, but you can only see it from here."

"Have you been drinking today, sir?"

"Haven't touched it in twenty-six years."

"Medication?"

"Antacids for my stomach. Cream for foot fungus."

"But you're out here looking at an invisible door."

"No, sir. I can see it plain as day."

"So if I come around there where you are, you're telling me I'll see it too?"

"I think so, yes."

With a shake of his head and a slight grin, the policeman sidled through the gap in the hedge and must have sensed the door even though he couldn't yet see it, because he moved around it.

"Well?" Ned asked.

The policeman stood next to him, turned toward the door, and went rigid. His breath escaped him in a low hiss, and then he nodded. "You must watch it, make sure nothing gets out."

"Yes, I know."

"It would be terrible if it opened. You must make sure it doesn't open. It makes my mouth hurt. My fillings are singing. You will stay here, won't you?" There was terror in his voice. "You must make sure nothing comes out." A moment before, he'd assumed the old man a loon. Now, he acted as if he'd been aware and lived in terror of the door his whole life. "I can't bear to look at it," he said, and then was gone, back out into the alley, his face white as a sheet.

The old man went back to watching the door.

It wasn't always an easy job. The door required vigilance and that often came at the cost of his personal comfort. It was impossible to watch it all the time, of course. He had to blink, sometimes to sneeze, but he knew, the same way he knew all the other things about the door that he'd never been told, that such perfectly human moments were allowed. At least, by whatever forces had assigned him the doorwatch. Humans, on the other hand, were not always so forgiving.

One Saturday afternoon, he found himself needing to go to the bathroom. Usually, it was enough to go once in the morning, again at noon, and then once or twice more after sundown, but he was getting older and his bladder was tired. Nearby was the empty 7-Up bottle he'd drained since coming out here at 8 a.m.—he found it most effective in calming his sour guts—and that seemed like a fine solution, so he unzipped himself, aimed his hose into the bottle, and relieved himself. A moment later, he heard a gasp and looked up to see Mavis Harkin from four doors down gawking in horror at him over the hedge.

"You dirty, filthy old man!" she screamed, and hurried away. Twenty minutes later, the cops were at his door, and because he could not abandon his post, they were forced to come around to the hedge and interrogate him, which irritated them greatly. Again, they maneuvered around the door without seeing it.

"Mavis is a busybody," he told them. "She'd die if she didn't have gossip to keep her heart thumping."

"She says you exposed yourself to her."

"Nonsense. I needed to go to the bathroom."

"And why didn't you?"

"I can't get up from here until the sun goes down," he explained. "I don't know how I know, but those are the hours. One minute earlier and something might slip through."

Unimpressed, they tried to haul him in for indecent exposure, but as soon as their hands found him, their radios squawked. Through them, Ned recognized the voice of the policeman he'd spoken to weeks before: "Leave him alone. That man must not be removed from his post. There will be hell to pay if he is interfered with in any way."

Confused, the police officers turned to leave, and that's when they saw the door for themselves.

"Jesus," said one, shrinking away from it. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't know, but I'm not waiting around to see what's on the other side of it," said the other, and they made themselves scarce.

Ned made sure to be more discreet with his use of plastic bottle toilets from that day forth.

For six years Mr. Barrow watched the door. He'd become something of a local celebrity, though in a town like Morrow, celebrity status was earned simply by doing anything out of the ordinary, like mowing the lawn after dark. The police had long since stopped paying him visits, and Mrs. Harkin never again passed by the hedge. Pastor Markham did come to visit one sunny Sunday afternoon, perhaps concerned that his one-time parishioner had found a better sermonizer. Ned assured him he had not.

"Thankfully, you don't always need to come to God. God can come to you. I wonder if you might pray with me?" Markham asked, his kind eyes like watery jewels in the sallow mask of his sickly face. Everyone was getting old and sick, it seemed. Ned would have liked to blame the door, but the only enemy here was time. No amount of watching could keep *that* from sneaking in. Thus, although he thought prayer a waste of time, he agreed to the pastor's request. Enthused, Markham knelt in the grass

before him and proceeded to quote scripture. Ned's faith had died with the death of his wife, the appearance of the door, and the conviction that whatever waited on the other side of it was as far removed from God as it was possible to get. He watched only for the devils now with no illusions that there was a celestial force to thwart them should they deign to breach the divide.

When the sermon was over and Markham saw the door, he stared inscrutably at it for almost an hour, muttering desperate prayers under his breath. Eventually he turned to look at Ned, and there was a great sadness on his face. "God's not in there at all," he wept. "Only shadows. What if they wake up? What if they creep through? You must not lower your guard, Ned. Promise me you won't. What will they do to us if you do?"

The old man had long considered this. He was meant only to watch the door. He had no idea what he was supposed to do if it opened. He hoped it never did. And if he died, he supposed someone else would be recruited to act as sentry, in his yard or their own. But if, *if* he should still be here when the door opened, was he meant to rush it and slam it shut, put his weight against it until the clamoring died down? He didn't think so, and could only trust that when the time came, he would know what to do, just like he'd known to watch the door in the first place without anyone giving the command.

He grew older and he grew sicker. A doctor summoned by one of his neighbors found him slack in his chair one winter morning. Wrapped in a heavy blanket, he appeared dead, his eyes at half-mast (but fixed as always on the door), his skin like old wax. He was pneumonic, but refused to be taken to the hospital, though he wondered what would happen if he were removed from his post. Would he awaken in his hospital bed to see the door standing there at the foot of it? The doctor fought him until he noticed the door. Then, like an emotionless automaton, he administered aspirin and anti-inflammatory drugs, armed Mr. Barrow with liquids, which he laid at the foot of the chair, and commanded one of the neighbors to help him hook up a heater via an extension cable threaded through the kitchen window. It was enough to keep him warm, but the recovery took much longer than it might have if he'd allowed himself to be admitted.

"You must stay with us," the doctor intoned. "You must, do you hear me?"

Ned, feverish but forever committed, could only nod.

Some men came around one day. Men he didn't recognize. They told him they were scientists or philosophers or professors or investigators. He was hard of hearing now and most of what they said was nonsense. Besides, it didn't matter who or what they were as long as they had not come to interfere with him. They theorized to themselves for three days about the genesis of the mysterious door. Mr. Barrow did not mind them being there, but he also didn't pay much attention to their ramblings. Occasionally he caught snatches of their pedantic waffling, divined mentions of electromagnetic voids and black holes and interdimensional fractures, but it meant little to him.

"I recall the Abigail Lane case," one of them said, "the house where people would disappear if they went upstairs, but not everyone, and not every time. A most curious case indeed. Selective subtraction. It presupposes an element of sentience, of awareness, of *purpose*. When I think of the disappeared, it is not with sadness, but envy. I, and I'm sure the rest of you will agree, want to know what they *saw* on the other side. I suppose it's much the same as wanting to see the face of God, assuming he is anything other than our own creation." Hums of agreement and then someone mentioned The Bermuda Triangle and the discussion became heated.

Ned watched the impassive black surface of door.

They poked and they prodded with their tools and their instruments, grumbling when the door wouldn't show up on film or video, complaining when it wouldn't yield like some suburban sword in the stone when they tried to open it.

The sun went down while they spoke. With great difficulty, for his joints were so badly atrophied from so much time spent in the red chair, it was almost impossible to walk unassisted, he rose and went inside, leaving the heater behind to warm the men while they spoke, which they did, until the sun came up again.

Soon, they would be gone.

He began to fear his death, only because he did not know what was to happen in his absence. The confidence that there were measures in place to compensate for his removal had started to erode. Moreover, he thought he might *miss* the door. Watching it had given him a sense of purpose in the vacuum of his wife's passing. It had subsumed his grief, replacing it with an obsession that was simple on the surface and unfathomable

underneath. It had become a symbol of the unknown, a talisman of the mysteries of life and death and beyond, and of stalwart obstinance, for while he and the world around him faded and grew old and weary, the door had stayed the same, stolid, and unyielding.

Other times it occurred to him that maybe he had wasted his life. What if, after all the fear and dedication and wondering, it was nothing more than a simple door? What if the only unknowable void that had appeared was the one inside himself, a void it was now much too late to fill? What if it was *nothing at all*?

At around noon on July 8th, with the sun beating mercilessly down upon him, the air shimmering in the heat, and the houses deathly quiet around him as his neighbors sought solace in the shade, Ned Barrow fell asleep. It was not for long, perhaps twenty seconds, long enough for his head to nod once, twice, then again as the safety net tried to drag him back to wakefulness and then he jolted awake, startled that he had fallen asleep at all. He was eighty years old now though and had long ago earned the right, even if the gods of some unknown universe didn't agree, to sleep whenever he damn well liked.

Disgruntled, he squirmed in his seat, wincing at the protest of every joint and muscle and bone, and resettled himself. Parched and sunburnt, he reached down for one of the three plastic bottles of water in the grass beside the chair, and glanced toward the door.

It was ajar. Just a touch.

Eyes widening in horror, Barrow scaled a mountain of paralysis until he was standing unsteadily upright, arthritic agony bedamned.

He hadn't heard the doorknob turn. Hadn't heard the click of the latch releasing. No springs, no hinges, no creaks or groans. Nothing. And yet there it was, barely open but open enough to hammer an ache into his heart and panic into his chest.

"No," he whispered. "No, I was here." But even as he thought it, he knew simply being there had never been enough. He was supposed to *watch*.

Perhaps there was still time. Perhaps if he moved in a manner that belied his age, he could slam that door shut on whatever nightmare awaited on the other side, ready to heave itself into the world. Perhaps, perhaps. He shuffled, he hobbled, he jogged, and lurched until his right elbow connected with the door. He expected resistance, imagined he felt something push against the other side, but then it shut with a satisfying click, and he almost wept with relief.

It didn't last long.

"What if it's out?" he asked aloud, and looked around in a panic.

The sun still shone, heating the sweat on his brow.

Somewhere a crow cawed.

The crickets still sawed their legs in arhythmic lullaby.

The cicadas trilled in the trees.

Normal. It was just a normal day. Nothing had been given the time to ruin it.

But then, who opened the door? he wondered.

As he made his way back to the chair, the sun seemed to wobble. Ned blinked, sure it was his eyes, but then looked down at his shadow and saw there was more than one. There were several of them, in fact, growing from his feet, which was curious because the sun was before him, hovering like a blazing coin above his roof. Each one of those shadows, supposed offshoots of himself, was a more distorted version of the other. Some had claws, others had tentacles, a few had wings, and they were clawing and tearing blackly, soundlessly at each other, at him, but he felt nothing. Nothing but the strength slowly draining from his body as the truth dawned on him.

It was you, you old fool. You *opened the door.*

No, he'd never have done that.

He swallowed and felt something like a fist uncoil inside his throat, both inspiring and obstructing his vomit as another something stirred inside his stomach. Quickly, knees protesting the urgency, he turned and hurried back to the door. *I opened the door*, he thought in horror, as unknown things began to wrestle for dominance inside him and something enormous momentarily blocked out the sun, casting the world into darkness brief and cold.

But no, no it was more than that, and when he reached the door with the whispering undulating shadows mounting inside and around him, and threw the black door open, the truth sucked the last of the hope out of him.

On the other side of the door, he saw his yard, beyond it, his quiet empty house.

I didn't just open it, he thought.

And the empty red chair.

I walked *through* it.

The door slammed shut in his face, on the real world, leaving him at the mercy of this strange new one, whichever world it was, as the sun flickered and died.

Then there was only the suffocating dark and the sound of gleeful things rushing to bid him welcome.