

The Door

By Alexander Saxton

To the new tenants: I thought I'd leave this recording, to give you a sense of the place you've just discovered.

I know you're probably desperate for some answers, but, sorry to disappoint, I'm going to start from the beginning. You'll have to wait a bit longer to find out the significance of my little hidey-hole. Apologies, people, but it took me months to figure things out: you can wait ten or twenty minutes.

Where to begin. Uhh...

An old coworker of mine had once lived in the apartment, one or two tenants before me.

"The landlady's a bit nuts, but you don't see much of her," he said. Everything else seemed to get the all-clear from him. No bugs, none of the unexpected problems you sometimes get moving into a new place.

But he didn't seem enthusiastic.

I tried to draw out what was bothering him. No leaks, no electrical problems, nothing like that.

"Anybody ever get murdered there?" I said.

He responded, "Lol."

"Seriously, though. Is there any reason you can think of why I shouldn't move into this place?"

His answer was,

"None that I can speak of."

So my roommate and I went to view the apartment.

It was a cloudy morning in September. Autumn had come early. At that time of year, it's usually still hot and golden. We still called it an "Indian Summer" when I was growing up, but I guess that's pretty racist. I don't know what we call it now. "Climate Change Summer", maybe. Either way, that year, it wasn't one of those. It was cold and damp from the moment September hit the calendar.

The landlady was already wearing a winter jacket over her yoga pants. She was covering her eyes with big shades, which I would describe as halfway between 'wine-mom-hangover' sunglasses and 'old-person-who-just-had-cataract-surgery' sunglasses. Maybe it was just the weather, but she looked a little grey. Even from behind dark glass, she wouldn't make eye-contact with us.

"Here's the place," she said, and then loitered by the door, impatient for us to get out. The apartment was a little grimy: she hadn't cleaned up after the previous tenants, but it was nothing objectionable. We asked the usual questions, got satisfactory answers, et cetera. The rent was about 200 less per month than we had expected, but my roommate played it cool and talked her down an extra fifty.

The two of us had done this 'new apartment' dance a couple of times. We shared a quiet nod of triumph when the landlady turned her back.

By the time we were headed back out the front door, we'd made a verbal agreement with the landlady: papers to be signed later that week. I only had one question.

"What's that door in the hallway?"

It was just at the top of the stairs, up one extra step. It had a ring and latch above the deadbolt, and it was sealed shut with a padlock.

"That's closed," she said. "It's not included in the lease: you can't go in there."

"But what's on the other side," I said.

"It's just a fire code thing," she said, and checked her phone. "I'm sorry," she added, quickly. "I have to go. Is there anything else?"

I had a few extra questions about that door, but my roommate was giving me the 'don't ruin this for us' stare, so I shut up.

Three days later, we had keys and a copy of the signed lease, and I was staring at a pile of our boxes on the living-room floor.

"You never realize how much shit you have until you have to move it into a new place," I said. Beyond the pile and down the hallway, I could see that sealed door, and it could see me.

"I wonder if there's a spare room back there. It would be great if we had somewhere to ditch some of this stuff."

"You know how to pick a lock?" Said my roommate.

"I could learn."

"Well go ahead," she said. "It's not like the landlady's gonna kill us if we break her rules or something."

We both laughed at that, because the landlady had given us the heebie-jeebies, and we already had a running joke about how likely she was to murder us.

Trust me, it seemed funny at the time.

I did try and pick the lock that evening. I have no idea how to pick locks, and I was a couple of beers deep at the time, but I still gave it the ol' college try, all while my roommate and a couple of her friends shouted encouragement from the living room couch.

No luck.

The door remained shut.

Like the land-lady, it turned into a running joke. We referred to the mysterious space behind it as the 'spare room'. Something went missing, we'd say, 'check the spare room.' My roommate's deadbeat friend wanted to come and crash on the couch again? I'd tell her he could stay 'in the spare room'.

But like the landlady, it became a joke because there was something unsettling about it: some particle of discomfort that we turned into a pearl of irony, to keep it from cutting us.

At night, those nights when my roommate was out at her boyfriend's place and I was alone in the apartment, it didn't seem so funny.

The door stood along my route to and from the bathroom.

Any time I woke up needing to use the toilet, that door would be the first thing I thought about when I opened my eyes.

"Tonight's the night," I would think. "Tonight's the night I open my bedroom door, and it'll be facing me down the hall, and it'll be open, and inside it will be..."

I was never sure. Sometimes I would imagine something horrible: a kill-room draped in plastic sheets, still crusted with the blood of old victims.

Or other times, the door would be open, and beyond it: a tunnel to a better place, to some urban Narnia where the rent was 400-a-month, and they had universal mental health services. And maybe fauns.

And every time I woke up like that, I would climb slowly from my bed and hesitate a long moment with my hand on the bedroom door, torn between fear and anticipation, hearing nothing but the throb of my heart.

And every time, when that pounding in my ears became unendurable, I would fling open the door and stare down the hallway. And there, at the top of the stairs, would be...

A closed door, sealed and locked.

I would relax, and laugh a little to myself, and walk to the bathroom, trying to ignore how my arm hair stood on end, as if by static, as if some great generator lay just behind that lock.

And then, as I sat on the toilet, grinding the sleep from my eyes with the heels of my hands, I would convince myself I heard the click and groan of an opening door. The anticipation would build again. I would ease open the taps to wash my hands, quietly as I could, and craning my ears for the sound of footsteps, or distant song, or falling snow. Once more, I would press my ear to the door, hands resting clammy on the knob, savouring the foretaste of wonder or dread.

Once, and I'm ashamed to admit it, but once, I spent forty minutes with my feet hugged up on the toilet seat, too frightened to open the bathroom door. Frightened of what I might see; frightened of what I might not.

But every time, at last, I would open it, and on the other side, waiting for me, would be nothing; a darkened apartment; a locked and sealed door, and beyond it, my own, empty bedroom.

An unbearable relief; a crushing anticlimax.

Two months in, we had some people over. My roommate's boyfriend, her sister, a couple of her friends. It was one of those events where, with a little shock, you realize how much your social circle has changed. It's hard to meet new people in this city, and it's just as hard to keep in touch with old friends. When my roommate asked if there was anyone I'd wanted to invite, I'd realized the answer was no. The city was a sea. This little group was my only raft.

"So what are you up to these days?"

It was my roommate's sister asking, and I didn't have any good answers to the question. Work, survival, anomie. Same as everybody. So what I said was,

"Well, I'm putting a lot of my energy into this secret door."

"Secret door?"

I looked at my roommate, shocked.

"You haven't told her?" I said. "It's all we talk about!"

"It's all you talk about," said my roommate. "I always forget it exists until you bring it up."

I thought she was joking at first. Why else would she say something so bizarre? We talked about the door *constantly*.

"How are you not obsessed with it?"

At this point, the whole room was paying attention; some of them looked confused; some of them looked uncomfortable. There was an edge in my roommate's voice.

"You want there to be something," she said. "But there's nothing. You know that, right? It's probably an electrical box that she doesn't want us fucking with. Probably some fire code violation or other shady landlord shit, but whatever. Every apartment in this city has that."

"Oh, you don't believe that any more than I do. There's got to be something. Why else was the landlady so cagey about it? I bet, at *least*, that she's got some weird old family shit back there."

"No she doesn't," my roommate sighed.

I told her, "Ten to one there's a dead body. Worst case scenario? A cursed armoire."

I looked around for some kind of approval, but nobody was smiling. I suddenly got the impression that my roommate had been... talking to them about me.

About this. Had I been... but surely I hadn't been talking about the door that much... And I almost never spent more than an hour fiddling with the lock, at a time...

She looked to her boyfriend for help.

"You used to have a door like this in your old apartment, right?"

"Y-yes," he said.

I could tell he didn't want to get involved.

"And?" she pressed him.

"And it turned out to be nothing," he said. "My buddy took the door off its hinges, and it was just a door that led to the next apartment, that had been bricked up."

"Okay," I said. "But this door doesn't lead to the next apartment."

"How do you know," my roommate said.

"I just do."

"You just do."

"Fine," I said, standing up. "Let's prove it. Let's go next door and ask to take a look around. I'm willing to bet you, ten to one, that they don't have a matching door."

Nobody else stood up.

"Come on," I said. "I mean it."

"We're not going to go bother the neighbours over-

I cut her off.

"What's wrong? Afraid I might be right?"

"*Can you stop?*" she shouted.

A deep silence descended. My roommate looked as if she was on the edge of tears. I was taken aback. I'd never seen her act this crazy before.

"Look," she said. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's just go out and have a nice night, okay? And come out with us. You never come out anymore. It'll be good for you, okay?"

The air was so thick you could have choked on it. She was right about one thing, at least. It had been a long time since I'd had a night out. I wasn't getting many hours at work, and I had student debts to pay off.

"Okay," I said. "Sure. No big deal. Let's go out. I won't bring it up again."

"Thank you,"

She flung her arms around me, and when she pulled back, she was wiping away tears of relief. Now I was more than taken aback. I was worried about her. Was she doing okay? I knew

that she had a lot on her plate, too. I tried to make eye-contact with her boyfriend, but he refused to meet my gaze.

That night, we went out dancing. It had been a long time since I'd been out dancing. It was a really great night. I ended up meeting someone and going home with them. I stayed over, and we went for breakfast in the morning. It was the first night in two months that I hadn't spent half an hour crouching in front of the door, listening. When I got home, my roommate was in a good mood, and we spent the rest of the day as though our fight the night before had never happened.

My hookup and I texted back and forth for a couple of days, and then they ghosted. That was around when I started noticing the smell.

"Don't you ever smell something when you walk past there?"

"Past where?" My roommate was preoccupied making lunch. She always brought a packed lunch to work, because she had her shit together. I sat at the table, and poured myself a cup of coffee.

"The Door."

She froze, back arched. It was like I'd just doused her with cold water.

"I thought we were past this," she said.

"Past what?"

"The door."

I decided to tread carefully. I didn't want her to flip out again.

"No, it's nothing like that. It's just there's this smell I keep smelling at the top of the stairs. Sweet, and a little bad. Like a dead mouse. Do you think maybe a mouse died in there?"

She gagged a little.

"God. If there's a dead mouse back there..." She turned pale, and then added, "Oh god, what if there's a bunch of dead mice back there?"

I jumped onto the idea.

"If there are," I said, "Don't you want to know?"

"Fuck no," she said. "I want to leave that shit sealed up and never deal with it."

"But isn't it better to know?" I said. "Isn't it better to know for sure, so you can do something about it, than to spend your whole life wondering?"

She turned to look at me, with a hard, clear look in her eyes. She answered,

"No."

I was surprised by the feelings that welled up at her response. I was angry: furious. Why didn't she care about this? These little mysteries were part of the fun of any new apartment: they were the sorts of things we'd spent weeks figuring out at each of the places we'd lived before. But now that we'd moved in somewhere with a real enigma, she couldn't be bothered to even pay attention? I couldn't understand, and without saying anything else, I stood up, white-lipped, slammed my chair into place under the table and stormed out of the room.

A few minutes later, she knocked on my bedroom door, apologizing, and asking to talk. I ignored her and waited until she left for work, before leaving my room.

I spent the rest of the morning trying to pick the lock again. I called in sick to my job. No luck.

I was now *convinced* there was something on the other side. The whole concept had started out as an idle notion, a fun little obsession to distract from the fact I was a single, 30, broke, and still living with a roommate in a shit apartment in a shit part of town.

But things had moved well beyond that, now. Now, I was sure I'd heard things moving in there at night. Sure that I'd heard the lock click and unclick in the deep hours of the morning. Sure that I'd heard warm and distant conversation on the Other Side. Sure about that smell at the top of the stairs.

"You didn't go to work, did you?" she said, when she arrived home that night.

I was sitting in front of the door, with the toolbox spread out in front of me.

"No."

"Tell me you're going in tomorrow."

It wasn't a demand. It was a plea. I said,

"Not a chance."

I think that decided it. In retrospect, it's clear to me she'd been looking for an excuse to move in with her boyfriend for a long time, and I'd just given her one. That night, as I sat in front of The Door, trying to catch a whiff of that strange, sweet, intoxicating smell, I overheard snatches of conversation from her room. She was on the phone with her boyfriend, as usual, and I caught words and phrases like 'Scared' 'Don't know who to call', and 'Can't deal with this anymore.'

She told me she was moving out the next morning.

I didn't respond. I just left the room and went back to bed.

That may sound like something a person would do if they were depressed. But I wasn't: truly. With her gone, I was finally able to devote all my attention to The Door. Yes, I slept through that whole day, and the day after, and the days after that, but not because I was depressed. It was just because I was up all night, every night, searching for a way in. I tried to unscrew the latch, but the screws were stripped. I tried to prybar the door open, but couldn't get the leverage. I tried snapping the lock with a pair of bolt-cutters I couldn't afford, but I wasn't strong enough without my roommate to help me, and all I managed to do was score the steel.

When I had exhausted myself, I would sit for hours listening at the bottom of The Door. Now and again, I would catch the rare rustle of... of something. Now and again, a faint tendril of that smell would spill around the cracks, off-putting, but... *inebriating*. You know the kind of smell: the kind that's so bad it's good. Naturally, I'd quit my job at this point. The *hell* I was going to spend ten hours a day waiting tables when there was a mystery that I was so, so close to cracking.

Something was on the other side of that door. Something familiar. And if I could just find out what it was, then all of this would have been worth it. And I was right on the edge of discovery.

Now, to this moment, I'm not sure what happened next.

I think the door changed.

A part of me isn't sure, though. A part of me thinks the door was always that way, and I had just never noticed. But mostly I don't believe that. No: mostly, I believe that the door changed: that the moment my roommate was gone, the familiar thing inside the door realized that the time had come to let me in.

But in any case, one way or the other, a week after my roommate moved out, I was sitting at the base of the door again, trying to peer through the crack at the bottom. And when I looked up, the door's hinges were on the outside.

Surely, *surely*, they hadn't been before. Surely, the hinges had been facing inward up until then and only now had switched, revealing themselves, showing me a way to the other side. Suddenly the whole hallway seemed to fill with that sickly-sweet smell. I laughed to myself.

"Finally," I said. "Finally, finally, finally finally finally finally."

Energized, I rushed to the mudroom we shared, sorry, I shared, with the upstairs neighbours, and stole 'The Good Pair' of pliers from their toolbox. I locked the door behind me and turned out the lights. I didn't want anyone to think I was home. I didn't want to be disturbed.

With trembling hands, I unscrewed the hinge pins and drew them out. I shouldn't have been strong enough to do it. It had been a long time since I'd eaten, but I like to think I was getting help. Help from the familiar thing on the other side. Help from whatever had moved the hinges to help me let it out.

The third pin clanked against the parquet floors as I threw it aside. The door, hingeless, stood in front of me, held in place by years of inertia, by a slight swelling of the wood from the clammy air.

I took a deep breath. I steadied myself. I felt my face flush. I felt my breath catch. The whole universe seemed charged with meaning, immanence. *This was the moment*, and I paused to drink it in, to get high on a sense of purpose I hadn't felt for years before The Door came along.

I took up the prybar. Gently as I could, I worked it into the thin gap alongside the door. Old paint groaned. And then, with a sound like a sigh, the door sagged into my arms.

I closed my eyes, putting it to one side. A breath of dusty air filled my nostrils, but it carried no hint of sickly-sweetness.

I opened my eyes, ready to welcome whatever lay inside.

The breath caught in my throat.

I fell to my knees.

The room was empty.

Empty.

Empty.

The room was empty, and so was I.

How can I describe the sense of loss that I felt? I'd been living for the last, desperate hope of some revelation. And here it wasn't, in an empty cubby of a room, with an outdated electrical box in the corner, and a sheen of dust along the floor.

I think I sat like that for a very long time: how long, I'm not exactly sure. I got tired, though, and the brutal fluorescence of the streetlights through the living-room window hurt my eyes. Ahead of me, the empty dimness of that little cubby beckoned: a haven from the harsh glow of the world. I climbed up the two steps and nestled myself into nook below the electrical box.

It was very comfortable in there. It felt safe and warm. The walls around me held me close, and I didn't feel so lonely.

I looked out the door, down the hall and into the living room, where my roommate and I had stood on our first day in the apartment, discussing the need for extra storage space. It seemed to me at that moment that I could see the two of us there again, standing with our boxes of stuff, just like all those tenants who had come before, and all those who would come after. All of them intrigued by the mystery of the door; all of them convinced some answer to some unknown question lay behind it; all of them wrong.

And all of a sudden, my heartbeat quickened, and I knew what I had to do. I clambered down into the hall and gathered up the hinge pins, pliers and pry bar. Jittery with excitement, I leaped back up into the cubby and dragged the door into place behind me. Darkness fell. The harsh glow of streetlights or sunlight outside- I didn't know which- were blotted out as the door slotted into place, the hinges meeting neatly as a well-matched set of teeth.

The answer had been in me the entire time. The answer had *been* me the entire time.

It was dark inside, so pleasantly dark, but a beam of light shone under the door, enough to dimly see by, enough to work by. It seemed to me that shadows passed beneath it now and again; the shadows of people on the other side, and that through the door I heard the rumble of low voices, talking.

"It's not included in the lease: you can't go in there," someone said. And then more voices, different voices.

"Don't you want to know what's back there?"

"There's nothing back there."

I laughed to myself and fumbled with the hinge pins. Of course, the hinges were on the inside: they always had been, until something, somebody, somebody familiar, had moved them to the outside, not to get out, but to let me in. I slid the pins into place; I used the pliers to screw their caps on firmly. I settled into my nook beneath the electrical box. I settled in to wait.

I'm getting sleepy now, but I'm still smiling, here in the darkness. My phone's low on battery, so I'm going to turn it off once I'm finished this recording. So you can listen to this, when you find it, whoever you are.

I know you've been searching for a long time, trying to get into this room, trying to find out what's inside. You deserve some answers, and now you have them. You've solved the mystery of the room, when everyone said it would be nothing, it would just be an empty space.

And now? Now it's up to you. Maybe you'll tell the world and take me out of here.

Or maybe you'll pay it forward.

It would be nice if you came to stay.

You wouldn't feel so lonely.