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When I left the Door Open

1st time I left the door open was by accident. I'd just signed in at this old wooden hotel. It was a charming place in the Old Town. The main street ran by, but my window was facing a little garden where they kept a restaurant in the summer. Now the whole town was quiet as a grave. Tourists had left. Cold and wind kept the locals indoors.

After getting the key I dropped my battered old suitcase at the room. This wasn't when I forgot about the door. That came a little later. Now I just changed out of my good pants, the one's I kept for travelling and business. I settled for faded jeans. Then I decided to take a quick stroll outside before it would get dark.

The Old Town was picturesquely pretty. Two-storied wooden old houses like my hotel, humongous white stone church, a tight cluster of fancy shops, restaurants and bars that all came with a stunning ocean view. They too had all closed for the long winter, which was all the same to me, because I had very little money to spend anyway.

The wind was merciless. Near the church I climbed on top of a hill that was overlooking the cemetery. There was also a small lookout tower. I decided to ascend the stairs to see the view, and was not disappointed. Behind the church & cemetery I could see the whole sleepy town. Towards the sea the view was even better. Sun was already setting behind the nearby islands, but a few lingering rays still illuminated the shorefront in a way that lifted my heavy heart. I knew that tomorrow was still waiting for me, but on that moment it didn't bother me.

On my way back to the hotel I bought a sandwich and a cheap bottle of red wine. After eating this simple fare I tried to pass the time by reading a bit, but my heart just wasn't in it. I got up to turn off the lights. The switch was in the hallway, but even so I did not notice that I had left the door open.

My sleep was restless. A few dreams came and went. They were dreams with shadows of people chattering just beyond the edge of my comprehension. The sort of dreams you'll

never learn to understand. In the heart of the night I woke up. My room was on the first floor, and indeed I was under the assumption that they all were. But now I was hearing footsteps above me. The old floor was creaky and left no room for doubt. Somebody was carefully pacing up and down the room above me. My left hand was not tucked in and I could feel the sudden cold creeping all the way to my armpits. After a while the pacing ceased. I drifted back to sleep.

Fall was on the very brink of turning into winter and the nights were utterly black. Next time I woke up there was no light coming in from the window. I'd seen a streetlight before but now it was gone. I couldn't see anything except for the smallest sliver of light coming from the hallway. Outside a woman was laughing softly. I think I heard a man saying something. Then the voices ceased. I sat up on my bed and tried to peer into the hallway. Where was that small ray of light coming from? It must be the moonlight I guessed, but how could it pierce the windowless door? And the cold, I could really feel it now, biting through my flimsy shirt. I followed the stream of air to the door and saw that it was open.

A shadow had formed against the moonlight. Somebody was standing outside. Then I heard the footsteps again. The shadow receded. I grabbed the handle and closed the door much too quickly to convince myself that I wasn't scared. I kept blaming the cold, but it was a lie, the sort of a story you tell your children after they've seen a nightmare. I stayed awake for hours and only fell back asleep when the first streaks of pale sunlight were already visible on the horizon. These few restless hours offered little help. I had to get ready for the funeral.

2nd time I left the door open I did it on purpose. I'd just arrived at my aunt's cabin in the countryside, few hours outside of town. My aunt had been kind enough to let me stay here for a couple of days after the funeral. She'd seen I was a wreck and suggested that I should go out there by myself to get my ducks in a row. She even offered to give me a lift, but I told her that would be too much. Instead I took a train to the nearest small village. After buying a meager collection of provisions I hired a cab to drive me up to the cabin.

The cabin was at the end of a narrow country road, squeezed between a patch of woods and an open field. From outside the place was bleak, windy and in sad state of repair. Inside, however it was very cozy. I decided to sleep in the guesthouse, built on the gently sloping hill

where the woods began. I spent my days in the main building, but did not want to stay there for the night. I'm not sure, but I think it had something to do with my childhood. Every summer my mother and I would come up here for a week or two, and it was sort of an unwritten rule that she would sleep in the main building, and I would sleep in the guesthouse. My mother loved me very much, this I knew, but she never gave me permission to sleep next to her, not even when I was a very little boy, not even if I'd had one those bad dreams that all children sometimes have. She said that I should learn to take care of myself.

The days were exhausting in a good way. I kept two fires going continuously, one in the main building, one in the guesthouse. It was the only way to keep the cold at bay. I chopped wood, carried water inside from the ancient stone well and made dinner. I read books and even wrote a few lousy poems. Life was good in its simplicity.

Third night was the night I left the door ajar. First night had been quiet, but on the second I'd heard some noises. Footsteps pacing against the gravel outside. I tried to peer through the small window, but could only see a glimpse of a retreating shadow. Fear was like cold metal object under my shirt. Yet there was something, maybe in the wind that kept howling like a wounded animal? Maybe in the tentativeness of the steps? Or the narrow flimsiness of the shadow itself? I couldn't put my finger on it, but it made me leave the door open the next night.

Now it needs to be understood that I wasn't well at the time. This was not a decision of a rational mind. I was drifting. I felt like I had come into contact with someone who needed me. There had been a fleeting sense of terror by its proximity, but also longing. Sense of solitude that I could relate to. I had to leave the door open.

I ate a few biscuits and drank apple tea before bed. Letting the fire die down on the hearth in the main building, I crossed the pitch black yard into the guesthouse. I was grasping an oil-lantern in my hands, but didn't light it. If the shadow was near, I didn't want to scare it away.

Carefully leaving the door ajar about an inch or so, I entered my homely bedroom. A bed and a small table completed the ascetic furnishing. The walls were stuffed with old paintings of

birds and fields and rolling hills. I was fairly certain that sleep would be miles away. I was also wrong. I'd hardly placed my head on the pillow and dragged the rough blanket over my lower body when I slumbered.

At first it felt like a lucid dream. I could hear the steps again outside. This time they were edging closer bit by tiny bit. They crossed the gravel that blanketed the yard. Nearer the guesthouse there was only damp, resilient soil. I could scarcely make out the sounds of movement. Again the moon was high on the dark sky, peering inside from the small window and illuminating the doorway. I waited. Seconds turned into minutes. I drifted back asleep.

There was a creaking sound. I opened my eyes. Someone was at the door. I could clearly make out the shadow by the door. Terror was keeping me pinned down. I tried to make out details from my haunter, but darkness denied this. Whether it was human or not, male or female, I remained uncertain.

The slightest whisper erupted from the figure. It was like a single note from a beautiful, horrifying song. It broke my spell. I sat up.

'Don't go!' I pleaded, but in vain. I had scared the shadow off. With inhuman speed it retreated from the door. There was strong gust of wind that threw the door shut. A soft curse escaped from my lips. I had been too eager. I could hear no steps from outside, just the wind beating mercilessly against thin walls. I wondered if we'd meet again.

The 3rd time I left the door open there was no door to lock.

After the shadow had retreated I couldn't sleep anymore. There was no point even trying. Knowing that my chance had slipped away for the night, I lit the lantern and walked back to the cabin. The hearth had been cold for hours and the winter was gaining ground. Quickly and efficiently I got to work. I carried an armful of dry firewood back from the shed and patiently arranged them inside the fireplace. When I was satisfied with my work I lighted a fire. Then I filled the kettle with water and made some tea.

Slowly the cold retreated, hand-in-hand with the darkness. A bleak pre-winter dawn greeted me. The smallest flakes of snow imaginable began to float down from the sky. I expected them, or at least rather hoped them to lift my heart, but they didn't. Something was wrong. I knew it. It was almost as if I had a task to perform, but I did not yet know what it was.

Later in the day I drifted back to sleep. For the first time in months I had a dream that I'm sure of.

I was walking away from the cabin, slowly. I looked at my feet and they felt as if they had a mind of their own. I was just along for the ride.

Feet after feet the distance grew. The road was thrown into a winding curve. I looked back and couldn't see the cabin anymore. On I went. To my left was a never-ending field, to my right a thick forest. I nodded knowingly. I'd seen these when I had arrived.

The road straightened again. I was arriving at a crossroads. There was a sign, but it was so beaten by the weather that I couldn't make out the writing. I hesitated then stopped. I wasn't sure which way to go.

I looked at the sky. It was beautifully violet. Night was falling, but it wasn't cold. I didn't even have my jacket on, but I was fine. Looking around, I suddenly realized that I wasn't supposed to go anywhere just yet. I had to wait for something first.

Time was a stream and I was unable to measure its length. The violet glow remained. After a vague period of time I heard someone approaching. I turned to look and saw that a tall thin man was walking towards me. He came from the direction of the never-ending field. He was wearing a brown fedora hat and a rather elegant looking long jacket.

The man never stopped for a moment to acknowledge me, just strode past with his long steps. As he passed I saw a glimpse of his face. It was much older but I still recognized the features. The man kept walking past the crossroads and down the road that led deep into the woods.

When I woke up I immediately went to the window. The afternoon was almost gone. I knew I had to hurry. The wind was howling outside like a madman. Despite my efforts to keep

the cabin warm, I could feel the cold snatching at me from those old cracks in the wall that all such places have. My old jacket wouldn't do now, it was too cold. I turned my aunt's old dresser upside down and mustered whatever warm apparel I could find. After clothing myself according to the most ridiculous fashion, I gathered rest of my belongings, namely my notebook and trusty lantern. I gobbled down a few dry crackers and then I was ready to leave. Only stopping to lock the door, I left my aunt's old cabin and started on the road.

It wasn't the same road that I'd seen in my dream, not exactly, but very close to it. There indeed was a field to my left, although I could well see it ending couple of miles away to the borders of the adjacent village. And after a bend in the road I could see the small patch of trees to my right quickly growing into a full-fledged forest. So I knew where I was going.

From the crossroads I took a turn deeper into the forest, just like the man in my dream had done. After going on for about a mile or so I had to stop and light the lantern. Tall shadows of the trees were quickly heightening. Accompanied by the bitter coldness, they enveloped me completely. Still I walked on.

The road narrowed down into a trail. At first, I went past the old house on the right side of the road. It was so well hidden by the bushy spruces that I simply failed to take notice of it. Only after seeing a battered mailbox by the side of the road did I turn my back to have a closer look. I definitely saw something standing there, about thirty feet away from the road. It was some kind of a building. I knew I had to get a closer look.

It was an old dilapidated house. Most of the windows were broken. Small staircase leading up to the entrance had given in. Somehow during the course of time the door itself had disappeared. This place had been abandoned decades ago. Only a few more years and the whole foundation would collapse. The roof already seemed to have done that in places.

Getting in was a challenge. The stairs were of little use. I could see long rusty nails sticking out of the rotten boards. Stepping on them would be an invitation for Tetanus. Shards of broken glass didn't seem any more inviting, but after an inspection I found out that one of the windows could be opened with a careful effort. Placing the lantern on a nearby tree-branch for illumination, I slowly and steadily pushed my arm inside. I could feel the sharp edges of the

glass ripping on my sleeve, keeping small threads of cloth as souvenirs. Finally I got two of my fingers on the tiny iron handle and managed to turn it. The window was open.

Now I reclaimed the lantern and clumsily climbed inside.

I was surprised to find the house still mostly furnished. There were two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. The kitchen was small, barely more than hundred square feet. In the corner stood an old stove that still looked remarkably clean and devoid of rust. It had once been an expensive appliance. There was no table but two chairs remained and they even looked sturdy enough to sit on. A small cupboard was nailed to the wall. I opened it. It wasn't quite empty; there was a decrepit enamel pot. It would never be used now.

On the kitchen floor I also saw a pile of newspapers. I crouched to have a proper look. They were dated more than 30 years ago. In the faint glow of the lantern I saw glimpses of uninteresting headlines. For the time being I wasn't bored enough to read further on.

Kitchen had little else to offer so I moved on to the other room. It was a bedroom in the sense that it did have a large bed by the farthest window. The mattress was long gone. It would have been just as well to call it a living room, however. I saw a cozy looking fireplace and even some firewood still left on a box by the door. There were also two identical rocking-chairs and an armchair. The latter looked dirty and disgusting, but the rocking-chairs quite the opposite. I knew a thing or two about woodcraft, considering that my father had made a living out of it. I could tell that these chairs had been built by a skilled pair of hands. The owner had taken a good care of them; hardly any scratches were visible. Even the varnish still gleamed in the soft light as if it had been applied only yesterday.

I couldn't resist the temptation. Ignoring the icy wind howling around the corners, I decided to sit on one of the rocking-chairs. They both looked well able to carry my slim figure, so I picked the one that was closest. It held me perfectly. I even tried to rock it a little. The floorboards squeaked in protest but the chair moved back and forth gracefully, dancing the way that its maker had designed it to.

In my heart I knew I was at the right place. I would stay the night. I would light a fire in the old fireplace and fight off the cold. I would wait in this old house with no door. The shadow would come and I would welcome it.

Getting the fire going was easy for once. I only needed a single match to light the firewood with a strip of newspaper. For a while I just stood there by this stream of warmth that invigorated my stiff joints. I moved the rocking-chair by the fireplace. Then on a sudden impulse, decided to move the other one as well.

As the abandoned house bathed in the lively glow of the fire, it felt almost cozy. I was satisfied with my decorative deeds, but the room still felt much too cold to survive a wintery night. Near the fireplace there was a gaping hole in the roof and much of the heat seemed to dissipate through it. Retrieving some of the stuffing from the decayed armchair, I managed to plug most of the hole. This improved things considerably. At the same time something in the intact part of the ceiling caught my attention. The whole surface had been painted with beautiful bright colors. I reached for the lantern to examine it more closely.

Against the backdrop of a clear blue sky the artist had painted a grove filled with dark green trees and flowers of white and red. The scene showed a flash of childish talent. It also conveyed a clear message from the past. The occupants of this house had once been a happy family. Not a single doubt of that was on my mind. On the very corner of the ceiling I could see two names written clumsily in block letters. I read the names of two little girls that had once lived here. I recognized them both. My mother and my aunt.

I got back to the rocking-chair and added an armful of fuel to the fireplace. Then I leaned back and started rocking. After a while I dozed off.

I did not see nor hear the shadow entering. Past midnight I opened my eyes. Flames still crackled brightly in the fireplace. Somebody had added more firewood. I could hear the rocking-chair beside me going back and forth, back and forth, floorboards creaking. The shadow was by my side but I wasn't afraid. I knew it would not harm me.

Next morning I returned to the cabin to gather my belongings. Then I walked 5 miles back to the village and took a train home. It would be many a year until I saw that old house in the woods again.