

DON'T OPEN THE DOOR

The door towers over the figure of the little girl. The sound of knocking can cause her heart to flutter. A knock on the door or a turn of the doorknob can make her pulse race. The locks hold it closed for her protection. But if she opens it...

The door holds Marsha's attention more than her tea set and dollhouse and records and books. Those things she could control. Pick them up or lay them down when she wanted to. She stares at the door tracing the contours of the locks with her eyes. Willing the locks to hold firm. Checking the screws around the locks. Making sure the peephole was closed. She kneels down and peers under the space at the bottom of the door. *Why did they make that space so wide*, she wondered while watching feet coming and going up and down the stairs, back and forth to other apartments in her building. Holding her breath until they passed her door. Giving away, without knowing that she was giving it, her self-control to the door.

Ma explained it to me but I don't understand it all, thought Marsha. *Ma said I'm capable and self-sufficient. What? Maybe that means no company and play with my toys. Ma told me I'm a good thinker even though I'm only five and a half years old and that I'm smarter than the other little girls my age. I can read. "Run Spot run." That's why she can leave me by myself every long day. She said I'd be ahead of the other children when I start school, as soon as I'm six years old.*

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Each morning before Ma leaves for work she says, "Don't open the door for anyone, except me, of course. And I won't ask you to open it because I have my key. But if I lose it or forget it you will open the door. Just look through the peephole so you'll know it's me. Be careful you don't fall off the chair. And, eat all of your lunch."

This is the time when Marsha wants to cry. She doesn't want to be capable or self-sufficient. She wants to be with someone. Someone she can talk to, someone not imaginary or in a picture book, someone who can stay with her and be her real friend.

She did open the door once for Uncle Bill. She loved Uncle Bill. He wasn't her uncle. Ma told her to call him that. She knew him her whole life and he always brought her candy or some kind of present. So, that time when he knocked she opened the door and let him in. Marsha felt funny every time she thought about it. She should have listened to Ma.

Marsha had a chair ready to put in front of the door. Sometimes she climbed the chair and looked through the peephole even when no one was in the hallway. If someone passed by, she'd jump away and close the peephole as silently as she could. Breathing fast, sort of excited, wondering if someone saw her eye

"What if Aunt May comes?"

"She won't, she knows I'm not home." Ma puts on her coat and buttons it.

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“What about if there’s a fire.”

“Remember? I said go stand on the fire escape and wait for the fireman to come to you.” Ma puts on her hat, picks up her keys and purse and walks towards the door.

That’s when Marsha’s tears come seeping out. “Please don’t go.” She wants to tell her Ma that he might come back but she doesn’t. She won’t ever tell. “I have to go to work. You know that. I explained it to you already. I’ll bring ice cream home tonight. What’s your favorite flavor?” this is when Ma hugs her tight. “You know I like cherry vanilla the best.”

Marsha swipes the back of her hand under her nose to catch the tears and snot and gives a couple more sobbing sounds. Then she turns up her face to get Ma’s kiss.

She listens to the sounds of the locks. Lock one click, lock two, click. The door is secure. Marsha looks under the door and sees her Ma’s feet move from the door and take the first step down the stairs. Then she sees a bit of Ma’s torso and lastly the top of her hat.

There was no foyer or hallway separating the living room from the door. So Marsha was careful about making noise. She was afraid some one on the other side of the door would hear her movements and know she was home. She discovered the floorboards that creaked and how to avoid them or tiptoe on them

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when she went to the peephole. Marsha was always aware of the sounds she was making. The kitchen was only a step away from the living room. There was no bedroom. Marsha slept on a chair that became a bed at night and Ma slept on the couch. Only the bathroom had a door that could contain sound.

Marsha is not frightened in the morning. No one comes to knock so early. There are many pairs of feet passing her door and descending the stairs, some on the way to work others to school or market. This is the time she enjoys her toys. She even moves around the apartment making noise. Normal noise, like dropping things or running water or singing to her dolls or turning up the volume on the record player to listen to some stories. For Marsha it's the best time of her day.

The bell rings from downstairs. *Is it him?* The sound sends a tremor into Marsha's body. *Does he know I'm home?* The knock at the door makes her body feel nervous and sick: stomach churning sick; need the bathroom sick; body trembling sick. The kind of sick that cannot be relieved by a baby aspirin or a spoon of grape-flavored cough syrup or a blob of Vicks rubbed on the chest. These kinds of sick leave when feet move away from the door and take themselves down the stairs. Only then can she breathe normally; go back to her dolls and her tea set; forget the bathroom; read her picture books; talk to her imaginary friends who leave her whenever someone is on the other side of the door. Why do they leave when she needs them most?

Don't Open the Door

The time she opened the door for him, Uncle Bill brought her a bag of jelly doughnuts. Marsha was happy to have it. After she ate one of them, he invited her to sit on his lap. She was happy to do so. She had sat on his lap as long as she'd known him. But this time was different. Uncle Bill blew in her ear and made her feel funny. Then he put his hand in her panties and told her what a sweet girl she was. Marsha squirmed and tried to get away from the hard thing in his lap. He just smiled and told her how much he loved her and he wasn't doing anything wrong. But Marsha knew he was doing something wrong and she didn't like it. Then he kissed her mouth and let her go. Marsha scampered into a corner and whimpered. Uncle Bill said, "Don't tell your mother. She'll be jealous. This is our secret. I'll come back to see you soon." He grabbed the bag of jelly doughnuts from the table, opened the door and left.

It was a long time before Marsha could pick herself up to go and lock the door. She thought Ma would feel bad if she knew what happened so Marsha wasn't going to tell.

She went back to the corner and held her raggedy Ann doll to her chest and buried her face in Ann's. She didn't want ice cream anymore. Marsha just wanted Ma to stay home and hug her.