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THE BACKDOOR LOCK

AFTER THE ACCIDENT, Lenn used the backdoor. It was a way around the sadness; through the back he wasn't coming home from work to find Molly once again not smoking on the front porch, not waving through the kitchen window, and not reading those slim French novels in the den by the vestibule. Through the back, he wasn't really coming home at all.

The lock's PIN code hadn't been changed since they'd moved in eight years ago, but until now Lenn hadn't taken the time to learn it. He had preferred that Molly let him in, the same way he'd preferred to keep his files, his contacts, his passwords—all the keys to his life—with her, like an ongoing trust fall. "Dangerously absentminded," she called him, and this was her manner of coddling. That was fine. God knew he'd done his share.

In the change bowl he found the PIN code written on a slip of paper. She'd placed it there for his sake: a numerical ghost of herself to let him into the house, continuing where she'd left off.

The lock's operation was simple enough. Coming home, you entered the PIN code and hit the oval button below the numbers, stamped with a padlock symbol. Leaving, you pressed the oval button twice. The gears made a faint electric whinny as the deadbolt pulled in or pushed out. That was all. Even the numbers were easy. *One, two, three, zero*: three steps up and then a total collapse.

But though the lock required no physical key, Lenn had difficulty. Again and again he found himself standing beneath the portico at the backdoor, blinking at the lock's cool flash of bronze, and wondering: had or hadn't he just entered the PIN code? Or maybe he'd done so incorrectly? Without a key to provide that unmistakable kerchunk of a deadbolt shifting position, he was never as sure as he liked. So he'd re-enter it: step, step, step, collapse.

And then one evening in late September he noticed the mug he held, the tea already half-drunk, wasn't his.

Lenn's custom was to steep a pot of herbal tea until the water went tepid. Molly had disdained this, her English blood crying out against cool tea, but the process structured his evening: he washed the dishes while it steamed beside him on the counter, then took it into the living room to read. He began with one of the dozen periodicals he kept up with and, when the first cup was finished, switched to a novel. An empty teapot meant bedtime.

Lenn eyed the mug. It was very like his old one, but it seemed to be made of authentic bone china because its Celtic knot pattern shone through the mug's pale interior when held to the light. He glanced around the living room, bewildered. Had Molly broken and replaced it without telling him? Yes, that was her all over, her sweetness emerging in secret, sly little acts. Ah, Molly!

The thought filled his head with its weight and brought his chin to his chest. He shook with tears.

But then it happened again and again—half a dozen times over the next few months. Things altered. He came home to find that all the upholstery bore the imprint of his backside, as though he'd sat in each for years. He slipped into bed and nearly yelped at the new softness of the blankets. He went down to the basement to chop wood and found, where the hatchet hung, a heavy fireman's axe.

"Dangerously absentminded"? This was something else.

Then there was the day he took down, for dusting, a certain photograph of Molly. On vacation in the Lake District for their tenth anniversary, they'd gone for a walk and encountered a mottled, shaky-legged lamb. Molly had always been shy to express her affection for small animals—she scorned all easy sentiments—and the photograph bore this tension visibly: she stood a few paces away, half-looking at the lamb, as though resisting an urge to stoop down and beckon it closer. It was one of Lenn's favourite pictures. He had taken it knowing that her protests were insincere, that she wanted a picture and only didn't want to want one.

Now, looking at it closely, he saw something new. Something that hadn't been there before. Her face was lit by a secret smile.

Lenn's neck prickled.

He once dreamed that Molly had left him for someone else—not a man but a dark and stooping shadow without a face. The dream showed him exactly what it felt like, exactly how he would inhabit the shape of that fury and that grief. His own sobbing woke him, and there in bed Molly comforted

him from the sting of her own infidelity. She'd done nothing, and yet he had been so angry at her. How could she cheat on him with that thing, which he knew was her own depression, her own sweet melancholy?

Lenn shattered the glass frame on the mantle. Then he lowered himself on the recliner chair, pressing his hands flat to the armrests to keep them from trembling.

Finally, after work the next day, he made the connection. Parking in the alley, unlatching the gate, and taking the weedy stone path to the back portico, his thoughts were elsewhere; he'd done this so many times that it happened automatically. And so, once again, he found himself staring uncertainly at the lock's bronze panel. Had he just, or hadn't he just? For good measure he entered the numbers again.

Immediately, a not-quite-human voice called out from within the house.

"Lenn!"

In the living room he found a macaw. It was perched in a tall cage by the spider plant; a feathered rainbow, it cocked its head at him and called again. "Lenn! Come home!"

He had always wanted a macaw—would have had one long ago, in fact, but for Molly's insomnia. After the accident it had crossed his mind that maybe now was the time, but it felt opportunistic. Now here it was, and it already knew his name. He inspected the bronze plaque on the cage—"Polly"—and an uneasy shiver passed through him. But of course that's what you called macaws. "Polly wants a cracker." The name had nothing to do with Molly. He found some seeds in a cupboard, and the bird ate naturally from his hand, as though it had done so a hundred times.

Lenn understood now. If unlocking a lock gives you access to what is yours, then a further unlocking gives you further access. Yes—when he entered the PIN code once, the bolt slid back once; when he entered the PIN code again, the bolt slid back once more, to let him more in. Entering the numbers twice wasn't the mistake. The mistake was only entering them once.

Nervous, yet unable to do otherwise, Lenn began to deliberately double-enter or sometimes triple-enter the PIN code when he got home in the evenings. Might he be greeted by his favourite vinyl of Bach's cello suites, set up on a record player? A row of warm macaroons arranged on the counter? But often, hoping for one thing, he got another. It seemed he possessed tastes

unknown to himself, tastes that the backdoor lock knew and revealed in stages. It replaced his library, book by book, and he followed along eagerly, for the new books were filled with marginalia in his handwriting: he knew he was meant, in effect, to catch up with himself. “Passion is not enough,” went one poem he’d underlined. “We die and are put into the earth forever. We must insist while there is time.” Polly he moved to another room, in order to remain uninterrupted; she had an unnerving habit of squawking at him, “Come home, Lenn! Come home!” His absorption in these books was so great that, finishing his tea, he didn’t go to bed but made another pot and kept reading. For the first time in months, he felt gladness. Things were happening again; life hadn’t dried up.

The evening a bottle of Bowmore Eighteen replaced his Jack Daniel’s, a glass already poured. It felt to him like a toast.

Half-drunk, he went outside into the back patio’s box of moonlight to peer with a penlight into the lock. The deadbolt rested far back in the shaft, like a worm in its tunnel. A flash of excitement lit his chest. He could make it retreat further than that. He’d been unlocking the backdoor two or three times and thinking that sufficient, but this still left the door mostly locked, even ninety-nine percent locked. He hadn’t yet entered his own home. Not once, not really.

Just then there rose a faint scuffing sound from inside. Lenn stiffened, listening. It came again.

In the basement, by the laundry room, he found a door. It was a solid oak slab that stood eight feet high with a huge brass knob in the centre, and it was locked.

He hadn’t set foot in the basement since he’d finished off the last of Molly’s frozen pies from the deepfreeze. Who knew how long it had been here? He put his ear to the door and heard a shuffling sound, like a creature pacing on the other side. He knocked, but the thing kept on.

A strange feeling came over Lenn. He stood very still. What was that now, sniffing? He waited. Long minutes passed, and his hand turned sweaty against the wood. All at once the sniffing broke out into full-throated sobs—a sound so hopeless, so heartbreaking, that his skin tightened and all that he knew was the urge to kick down this door and end that sorrow. Then, from the weeping, a voice rose up.

“Lenn! Oh, Lenn!”

His mind buckled like knees under a load.

Lenn threw himself on the door. The wood was so taut in its frame that not even a piece of paper would fit underneath; it didn't give one hair. A minute later, panting and sore, he collapsed with his back to the door, his head against the brass knob.

Maybe, he thought, she isn't really there. Maybe it's just her voice. Or maybe, if she's there, it isn't really *her*. She had driven into a concrete viaduct, the car had burst into flames, they had only identified her by her teeth. This couldn't be.

Molly wept on.

"They said you braked, Moll, but you didn't swerve."

His sobs were gum in his throat.

"Why didn't you swerve?"

He had asked so little of her in their life together. He hadn't asked her to work, to have children, to switch medications, to do anything at all. Just be. Was even that asking too much? "Goddammit, Molly—did you do it? Did you?"

His outburst sickened him into silence.

That night he brought the mattress from the master bedroom to the basement and stayed there until morning and then the rest of the day, skipping work, not eating, just leaning against the door and listening. "I'm here," he said now and then. "I'm right outside." Maybe it made some sort of difference. Maybe a part of her heard. With this hope, he began to reminisce out loud. "Remember that summer after our honeymoon?" he asked. "You were angry with me, and I said you could shave my chest hair into the shape of a heart if it made you feel better, and the next three weeks of vacation I was too embarrassed to go swimming. Remember that autumn you bought all those strange-looking squash and put them everywhere, in the bed, in the shower, behind a seatbelt in the car, like new members of the household?"

He went on. There was so much gone, so much of them that was now cut in half, and he felt compelled to rehearse it, to press himself against the ache of this half-having. It brought to mind those moments at the end of so many evenings when he would draw Molly to the couch, and they would sit together in stillness, neither of them needing anything from the other, neither of them with anything to say, everything passing through his awareness without judgment. There was an intensity to that peace. Sitting beside her, he realized anew each time: this was the point of it all. Not work, not books, not busyness. If he didn't get to sit next to Molly at the end of the day, the

day had failed. Only now, while he was sitting with Molly, she wasn't sitting with him.

At last, Lenn pulled himself away from the door. He knew what he needed to do. On the patio, his t-shirt stinking of himself, the night rain striking the portico, he faced the lock. One breath. Two breaths. He punched the PIN code and hit the oval unlock button. The gears drew the deadbolt back: *lrrr-zzz*. Then he punched the PIN code and hit unlock again and again. As he went on, he could feel something happening on the other side—a shifting, an expanding. At last he stopped, afraid. Never had he entered the numbers so many times in one go. Surely this would be enough.

When he stepped inside, all was changed. At first glance it didn't seem to be an inside at all: columns rose like ancient trees, making contact with a ceiling almost too high to see and creating a space so vast that a breeze had formed. Through the windows, which were everywhere, a hot silver light shone, as though the moon floated just on the other side. Lively cellos played a melody he couldn't recognize. There were clusters of soft blue lights swaying in the air, vines growing up the walls, and birds perched on those vines. Not any birds: macaws. "Come home, Lenn, come home," one said, and the rest took up the chorus. He looked to his right, where the living room had been, and saw vast bookshelves with material fit for an eternity of reading.

There, beside them, a stairwell descended to the basement. He flew down the steps and fell upon the brass knob, but the door was still locked.

Now Molly's sobs were louder than before, a banshee keening that drowned his thoughts. He smashed his foot against the solid, unbudging wood. It would take more than this to break it down, he sensed. It would take the strength of the whole universe and a little more.

Without forewarning, just as a wind suddenly dies, Molly's wailing ceased. From within he heard the sound of a faucet followed by flowing water, like a bath being drawn. Molly, who had suffered a guilt complex with even the simplest pleasures, had always needed to be talked into a bath. The energy bill, she'd say. We bathe too often. Humans aren't meant to have so many baths. Were there baths when our ancestors lived in caves? Her excuses always missed the main point: she loved them. And Lenn, with ritual regularity, teased her around to it each time. It was delicate, painstaking work, but how he liked to win, to see her finally slip beneath the steaming water with a sigh deeper than bones. And now she was in there, drawing a

bath he hadn't talked her into.

Lenn went for the axe. A part of him expected that the blade would not be able to enter the wood, that some invisible force might stop it. He planted his feet shoulder-width apart, brought the great steel head above him, and drove it into the door. The edge went deep. He brought it up again, its weight like a promise in his arms. "Molly!" he cried. And the blade came down. It rose up and descended until his arms were groaning, and still he hacked. Wood chips sparked off. A splinter-sized hole appeared. The hole grew until he could reach his hand through and unlock the door from the inside. Sweat dripped from his eyebrows to his cheeks. He flung it wide.

In a deep freestanding tub at the centre of a great darkness, Molly was submerged to the chin. Her eyes met his, and time stalled.

She stood. Tiny fingers of water ran down her collarbone and between her breasts. She took a step out of the tub. Her skin was flushed red as a peeled beet. The redness was too much; he wondered a moment if she had skin at all. Then a towel covered her, and she took a step forward, her raw skin steaming, and whatever doubt Lenn had harboured vanished.

"You were dead," he said. "The crash. The funeral. These months alone. You were dead." He moved forward and, while she stared at him in astonishment, embraced her. Her solidity made him gasp; it filled him with an uncontrollable need for her presence, and the deeper he pressed into her the more he needed. But she remained quite still.

He pulled back. Molly was looking out into the hall, where thin silver light fell on the floorboards and cello music feathered down from the stairway. Confusion, hope, pain, fear: all were mixed together in her eyes.

"Lenn . . ."

He flinched at her tight, quiet voice. Had he, after all this, made the same old mistake? Moved by that saviour impulse she found so tiresome, had he only intruded yet again, unwanted, into her dark mood?

She'd once said to him bitterly, "You are the only person I know who won't just let me be unhappy."

But that refusal was love, wasn't it?

"Come with me," he said.

She pulled away from him all the way up the stairs. "Where are we?" she said, seeing the vast room. "What's that light at the window? Is that a ghost? An angel?" Her questions increased in pitch as he led her to the backdoor. The rain hadn't let up, and the portico was too thin to cover them both. It

slapped her bare skin.

“It’s the lock,” he said. “A good thing is happening, if we want it to. We can go deeper in. There’s more unlocking still.” He entered the PIN code and heard the familiar electric whinny of the deadbolt receding. He entered it again, gripping Molly’s trembling hand.

“I want to go back,” she breathed. “I’m scared. Take me back.”

“Into the basement? Into the dark?”

“Yes.”

“No, Moll. I won’t. I won’t let you do that to yourself. Not again. Not anymore.”

As Lenn entered the numbers, again and again, something began to happen to the door. It grew warm, as though a sun burned just on the other side, and a sound came through, a thousand distant cellos going back and forth on the same note. Now there was the scent of jasmine. Now his tongue prickled. He was afraid, yes, but also excited, and feeling Molly’s hand in his gave him the necessary courage. How strange that entering your own home should take courage.

“Please,” she said.

“Molly, when will you learn that your unhappiness is mine? That I’ll always come for you?” He kept punching in the PIN code.

She looked at him, naked, shivering, her brown irises like tight fists clutching fear.

“Put your hand on the doorknob.” She hesitated, and he guided it there. “Now open it, Molly.” The deadbolt slid deeper and deeper, impossibly deep, the unlocking happening now at a level outside imagination, expanding into a place beyond any he had hoped might exist. “Open it,” he said. “Open it.”

And she did.