



THE DOOR YOU LEFT AJAR

A SCARY BEDTIME STORY
BY ENUMAELISZ

Hush.

Houses sigh at night. Pipes settle, wood remembers storms, and the hallway learns your name. Most sounds belong to the house. The others belong to the dark.

The Shadow People don't knock. They don't need to. An open bedroom door is their invitation—a thin slice of night laid across your floor like a black tongue. They wait for that. They're patient like mildew and tax season.

Close the door and they'll idle in the corridor, tracing paint on the walls with smoke-thin fingers, counting your breaths. Leave it open and they come in without coming in—edges first, corners first, a deeper darkness poured into the dark you already have.

You never hear them cross the threshold. You feel them in the way your pillow chills beneath your ear. You feel them in the extra weight on the air, like the room has taken a slow, heavy breath and refused to give it back.

They watch. That's their favorite part.

They love eyelids. Soft curtains. They hover so close your lashes twitch from the static of them. Then a fingertip—cool and dry as old paper—brushes once, twice. That's all it takes. They smear a night over your mind.

The dreams they press into you don't begin with teeth or blood. They begin with rooms you know, a phone you think is yours, a door you don't remember leaving open.

In those dreams, someone stands where the dark is thickest. If you squint, you lose them. If you stare, they bloom—taller when you look straight, thinner when you try not to. They never blink. Why would they, when you do it for them? Every time your lids meet, they inch closer. Every time your eyes open again, you've forgotten how far the floor is.

You've heard the rules. Everyone has, whether they admit it or not.

- Don't sleep with the door open.
- Don't roll onto your back. It gives them the best angle to your eyes.
- Don't wake all at once—wake like a diver, slow and careful, so your gaze doesn't snag on something standing where no one should stand.

Most people break the rules. Curious people always do.

Tonight, for example. You meant to close the door. You remember thinking it as you brushed your teeth: Close the door, I'll close it in a second. Seconds are small. They leak. By the time you're in bed, seconds are gone and the door is ajar by a polite, deadly two inches.

The hallway light is off, but the hall is never truly dark. It holds a faint city-glow that makes a ribbon on your floorboards. It stops just short of the bed, like it knows better.

You lie very still. Not because you're scared, obviously. Just... comfortable. Your phone face-down beside you thrums once—a notification blinking its little lighthouse through your blankets. When the light dies, the room doesn't go back to the same dark. *It goes deeper.*

They're here already, two of them, maybe three. You can tell by the way the silence pins your ears. You can tell by the taste—metal shavings on your tongue, cold coin. They prefer corners, yes, but they like doorframes best. Doorframes are thresholds; thresholds are promises.

You can picture them without seeing: the first is wide, shoulders the shape of wardrobe doors; the second is thin and too tall, a figure stretched wrong by a funhouse mirror; the third is only a head-height blemish on the dark, as if someone erased the hallway and left an error behind.

They watch you breathe. They count. In the count there's a hunger, and in the hunger there's politeness. They don't touch right away. They savor the part where you pretend to still be asleep.

On the fifth breath, something smooth grazes your lashes. A gentle, testing sweep, as if measuring the weight your dreams can carry.

The nightmare arrives like fog: you're on your sofa scrolling, and then suddenly—you're not. The phone screen is a mirror turned off, and in it the room reappears, *except the doorway is wider now*. You can hear the house. You can't hear yourself.

In the dream, you try to close the door but the hinges are gummy with night. In the dream, the gap keeps smiling. Shadows press their faces against the crack and flatten like fish at glass. Someone whispers, "Thank you," in a voice that sounds like your own played backward.

You wake because your throat forgets how to swallow.

Don't look, you tell yourself. Keep your gaze on the seam where blanket meets chin. The trick is to move your eyes like they're made of honey. If you catch anything in the doorway—if your gaze clicks into the empty and finds something looking back—**the binding** happens.

It's not a curse, not a contract you can burn. But from then on, they live where you aren't looking. From then on, you will never be alone in mirrors.

Your phone thrums again. Once. Twice. A needy pulse against the sheet.

A stupid part of you thinks: Who is it?

A smarter part of you thinks: *Don't.*

You crack one eye the smallest sliver to check the time. Just the time. Just the time, and then you'll go back to sleep, and the morning will be all coffee and jokes about how silly this is. The screen wakes to your movement and paints your pillow in a small, pale ocean. The ocean touches the door.

It widens.

Not the door—the dark inside it. It presses forward like a shy person leaning in to hear you better. You see... nothing, of course. That's the awful proof. It's darker than the dark around it. A hole in a hole.

You feel the next touch on your eyelid and, God help you, on the other eyelid too, both at once, like a parent checking their child for fever. They pet your sleep. They tuck a colder dream under your warm one.

“Close,” someone says, next to your ear. The word doesn’t belong to any mouth. It’s the sound of two curtains pulled together.

You understand what they mean. Not the door. *Your eyes.*

You realize you’re smiling the wrong kind of smile—too many teeth for no one in particular. You realize you’re listening for breath that isn’t yours. You realize there *is* breath that isn’t yours. It’s close enough to stir the baby hairs at your temple.

Whatever you do, don’t look.

The house hums. The fridge coughs. Somewhere in the wall, water remembers how to be rain. The dark in the doorway leans, leans, leans—until the shape of shoulders is almost a suggestion, until the hint of a head is maybe there, until your brain whispers, almost kindly, that you would feel better if you just checked.

If you look and there's nothing, you can sleep. If you look and there is something, well. At least you'll know.

Your phone light dies. The room swallows it whole. In that instant of true black, they move. The mattress sighs on the left side like someone put a knee there and decided against it. Your name creaks—your name, in your own voice again, but thinner—as though the doorframe is learning to speak. Your heart borrows a hammer from somewhere and starts a renovation project in your ribs.

Don't look.

You think of mornings spent with a mirror that always catches an extra shadow just outside the frame. Of TV screens reflecting a taller you behind you. Of windows at night that never quite give you back just your face. Of never being the only one in your photos, even when you are.

You squeeze your eyes shut like the world is a lemon and you want nothing from it.

On the pillow beside you, the phone shivers a third time.

The glow returns. A rectangle of pale blue. A message, blinking.

Unknown Number: *are you awake?*

You didn't tap anything. You didn't flip it over. But the screen is facing you now, as if someone wanted to make sure you'd see.

The light washes the ceiling, grazes the doorway, paints the silhouette that isn't there.

You feel it smile.

Your lashes lift a fraction without your permission.

The Shadow People adore accidents.

The blue light glances off a surface that ought to be empty and comes back wrong. Your eye finds a vertical where no wall is, a curve where no shoulder should be. The line between *almost* and *is* thins to a thread.

You feel that thread loop, once, twice, around the soft place behind your eyes.

And then—

(Whatever you do next, do not turn your head toward the door. Because if you do, you'll see what's leaning there.

And if you see it, it will be with you when the phone screen goes black.

It will be with you when you close your eyes again.

It will be with you when you remember, too late, that you left the door open.)

...Did you?

THE END

... ?