

The Back Door

It was almost unheard of to use our front door when I was a kid. That door led directly into our living room—a green-carpeted space where shoes were forbidden.

Life entered and exited through the back.

That backdoor sat at the top of the basement stairs and immediately transported you into a small alcove and into our linoleum kitchen. Boots and shoes still had to be off, but there wasn't any carpet to ruin.

That back door, despite leading into the safety and security of home, had its own treacheries. The aluminum frame screen door's lower corner could snag your leg and tear a nasty wound. If the pneumatic closer was adjusted too tightly, the screen door could snap shut on unsuspecting little fingers. If the boy collecting money for the newspaper delivery poked his pencil through the screen, it could set my mom into a fit. And if the safety gate was open at the top of the basement stairs, you could risk a tumble to the cement basement floor—like the time I ran inside still wet from the small, aluminum-frame kiddie pool and slipped. That fall landed me in the emergency room. I think Mrs. Montgomery heard my mom screaming. My mom probably thought I was dead. I think I was lying there, bleeding from a head wound, wondering if my brother pushed me. He didn't, though it probably would have served me right. Sometime earlier, in a fit of rage, I had stood on those same stairs and bitten him on the upper back.

Years later, I remember Mrs. Montgomery pounding on our back door, the aluminum rattling in its frame. We all know the difference between a knock and pounding. A knock asks permission to enter. Pounding announces that something is wrong. It's an urgent call for help, a sound of desperation, the kind of pounding that makes your heart skip because you know trouble has arrived.

Mrs. Montgomery stood there carrying her young daughter, who had fallen down their stairs. She was alive but hurt. Mrs. Montgomery knew exactly which door to use. Years earlier, she had run this same path to help us. Now she needed help of her own.

My mom grabbed the ice bags and her keys, piled us into the car, and drove Mrs. Montgomery and her daughter to the emergency room.

The Montgomery girl recovered, but honestly she and her family disappear from my memory after that. They might have moved away or simply just kept to themselves at their end of the block.

And oddly enough, I remember that they used their front door.

Just as houses have different doors, so do our lives. In our neighborhood, everyone knew which doors were off limits and which ones could be used without knocking. At our house, the back door was for people who belonged there—for neighbors carrying a dish of warm cornmeal mush, children running in and out, or a mother holding an injured child in her arms.

I have come to think that life works much the same way. When we are frightened, grieving, or in need of help, we rarely search for the grand front entrance or wait for an invitation. We run to the people whose doors we know by heart.

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