

CELLAR DOOR

By LC Allingham

I had worked since I was twelve, bussing tables at my uncle's restaurant, shelving books in the library, as a waitress, a nanny, a secretary to my professor before becoming a professor myself. I had pushed myself, pushed the limits of my world and sacrificed, but I had made it.

There were no challenges left for me in the working world, and there was one challenge I had put off for far too long. I sold my four-bedroom house. The one where I raised my daughter, where I divorced her father, where I got my tenure and published my first book of poetry. I dug up all my best roses and irises, and I moved to my granny home, to start my crone phase of life, or maybe my mother phase very late.

Nine hundred Creek Rd. A little stone ranch, tucked back from the street, a long slope behind it leading down to the Neshaminy Creek. No neighbors to be seen from either side. I could dance naked in my yard under the full moon, my sagging butt catching the silver beams of light, and there would be no one to care.

Just me and the house and the creek and the woods and Bronte, my shepherd-husky-poodle mix who I'd rescued a few years after Sabrina had her second baby. Bronte didn't care if I danced naked or spent the day smoking pot in the study and scratching out poems short hand. Just as long as she got her dinner on time and a place in my bed at the end of the night.

Sabrina drove in to help me move. I told her she didn't have to. She had kids. She had a house she was trying to renovate. She had an important full-time job and a needy husband and more than enough on her plate. She sighed when I said it on the phone, and I could picture her rolling her hard brown eyes up into her head like she'd done so many times as a teenager.

"I know you *can* do it alone, Mom, but you shouldn't have to."

When Sabrina saw the squat stone house with faded blue trim, she started to work her lower lip with her teeth, scraping them over it until all the chapped skin was scrubbed clean. I knew it was coming well before it came.

"You know, Mom, you are welcome to come live with us. We have space to build an in-law suite onto our house."

She'd been asking me for years. She wanted to take care of me, but this was how I finally was able to focus on *her*, give *her* my attention. I needed my own space, my own castle to retreat to as I learned to be a doting and attentive mother instead of a distracted professor.

"Dr. Salem, this credenza doesn't fit through this door."

Sabrina had more that she wanted to say but the movers needed my attention and she scurried over to tell them to take it around back.

#

No where I had to go today. Tomorrow. Next week. No one I had to see. No lessons to plan. No alumni events. Just me and the woods and the creek and the house and Bronte.

Solitude.

I settled into an easy routine. Get up at nine. Drink coffee in the sunroom overlooking the creek, take a walk with Bronte down across the crumbling stone bridge and through the woods, work on the book, smoke a joint and scribble some poetry. I took calls from Sabrina on her way home from work, discussing when she needed me to come by and tidy the house, organize her library, take the kids to the museum. The answer was always not right now. Then I would take a glass of wine down to the creek and sit and listen.

My house had been built in 1953. Same year as me. What had been here before then? Woods. Creek. No one. Or maybe something. Something that was still here.

It was only after I settled into my routine, after a few months in the house that I started to have the dream.

I'd wake up in the middle of the night and climb out of bed to use the bathroom. My new home only had one bath, and I had to go out into the hall to reach it. A minor nuisance I considered hiring a contractor to fix.

However as soon as I stepped into the hall, it expanded. The thick-planked hardwood floor was the same but the corridor had grown, wide and long and dark and entirely without doors. Up ahead I would hear voices and, miffed that someone was in my house without invitation, I would storm forward, thinking to chastise them. I would get closer and closer but just before I reached whoever was quietly conversing in my hall, I reached a stairway.

There was a stairway in my new home, down to the cellar, but this wasn't it. Perplexed and increasingly irritated, I descended the steps just in time to see a group of three depart a gilded service desk in the lobby I now found myself in. The space was dark

but tall stained-glass windows glowed from floor to ceiling on every wall and the wide plank hardwood was consistent with my hallway upstairs.

“Excuse me!” I called, but they didn’t turn as they disappeared into the gloom.

“Can I help you?” The man behind the desk asked. His face was illuminated with rainbows from the stained-glass.

He was plain, thin, prim-faced with tidy, arched brows.

“This is my house,” I cried. “What are you all doing in here?”

“I’m just showing people the way,” he said, his lips pursing as if I was the one being rude.

“It’s my house! No one belongs here but me!”

“I suggest you take it up with management.”

“Management?”

That was all I remembered upon waking the next day. It would fade in the morning, and I would go about my routine, but after having it so many times, I started to recall pieces of it throughout my days. I put a pen and paper beside my bed to notch off in the morning if I’d had it.

The night I went out with Alice Jefferson I had seventeen notches on my pad.

“How’s retired life, Di?” Alice asked, gazing at me from the rim of her pinot noir. She taught women’s studies at the university and was waiting to hear if she was going to make department head next year.

“I am becoming crazier the longer I am away from people. I barely ever wear a bra anymore.”

“Like you ever did,” she said and I laughed.

“My garden is going to be glorious come spring, and I should have the novel done around the same time.”

“I thought you retired to spend more time with Sabrina and the kids.”

I scraped my teeth over my lip. So did I, but in slowing down my life, I’d gotten distracted with dreams and creeks and poetry and pot.

#

Sabrina and her family came to my house for Easter. When the kids spilled out of the minivan I felt a pang of guilt that I wasn’t visiting more frequently. They were growing so fast and they would be off the college. I was supposed to be helping Sabrina with them while they were still around.

“Hey Di.” Sabrina’s husband, Jim, kissed my cheeks and handed me a pie. I wasn’t fond of him. He wasn’t sharp enough to keep up with my brilliant daughter, but I thanked him and tossed it onto the counter.

Sabrina lost her edge after a couple glasses of wine and started to make jokes that had her kids blushing. Dinner was amazing. I found myself surrounded by grandchildren, climbing over each other to tell me about themselves. This was my joy. This is what I had retired for. I needed to do this more. I needed to be more available.

Afterwards beds were set up in the sunroom and the living room and the study so that everyone could stay the night.

I climbed into my own bed, next to Bronte, thinking this was bliss, but found myself unable to sleep. Creeping out past my sleeping family, I crept down into the cellar to retrieve the packed bowl I’d stashed there and took it down to the creek.

I was a couple tokes in when I heard a voice behind me. “Mom?”

I turned to see Sabrina trekking down the hill. “You wanna share?”

“Share what?” I asked, trying to hide the pipe.

Sabrina reached me and snatched the bowl from my fingers, bringing it up to her mouth.

“This was a good night,” she said after she released a plumb of smoke.

I took her hand. The gentle tug of the creek started up around my head.

Something was here before we were here.

#

That night, in my dreams, I descended the wide stairway to find someone new at the desk. A tall woman with bright gray eyes looked me up and down as I approached.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“This is my house—” I started.

“But it’s not really your house,” she interrupted. “You just own the building. You don’t own the hall or the lobby. We have, however, determined that for your trouble we would be willing to give you access. If you would like.”

“Access?”

“To the members club.”

“I just want people out of my house,” I said.

“Actually, you’re in *our* house.”

I looked around, realizing she was right. This was some place altogether different. How did I get here from my bedroom door? I felt a tapping on my chest and realized it was my own hand, trembling against my sternum.

“Now, there is no reason for distress, Dr. Salem. We keep our halls in the utmost order and should you wish, we can ensure your paths here are filled in. You take your time and think it over. And maybe clean up your basement a bit. It really is a mess.”

“My basement?” I sat up in bed asking. Light streamed in through the bedroom window. I could hear the kids in the kitchen, clanging plates and pans around, trying and failing to be quiet.

I put a notch on the pad of paper beside my bed. Twenty notches. Twenty dreams. I’d only been here six months. But then, this dream had been a bit different, hadn’t it? I added a plus sign next to the notch. *We’re willing to give you access.*

I clutched the blankets up to my chest against the sudden weight of dread pressing down on me. Not from the dream, no, but from the prospect of sharing my morning, my home, breaking the quiet sanctity of my solitude with my family in the kitchen. Enduring Sabrina’s tired sighs and Jim’s ceaseless plays for approval and the beautiful kids with their bickering and noise. Bronte groaned beside me and I scratched her crooked black ears.

I shoved myself out of bed. My family wouldn’t be here for much longer and I, as the matriarch, had a role to play.

#

The basement was packed high with boxes from years of curriculums, textbooks that went out of print in the nineties, old work that I would never come back to, memories Sabrina had left behind. I’d cleared it all out of the attic and closets of my family home and had it deposited right down here, perhaps intent on leaving it forgotten. I had little use for the cellar except for storage.

It was oddly designed, sectioned off with plywood sheets into rooms with rotting workbenches and piles of calcified pipes the previous owner left behind.

And there was the closet.

I'd forgotten all about it after I'd moved in, which was strange because it was so weird.

Now I stood before it, scraping my bottom lip with my upper teeth, the same habit Sabrina had inherited.

The door was flimsy, particle board, and studded with yellowed pegs that had once held... what? It was bigger than a standard closet, more like a room, and it extended just slightly past the southwest wall of the house, with whitewashed cinder block walls.

The hanging bulb inside worked, illuminating the small, rectangle of space, the width of the house but with only a loose gravel floor.

Why had this been built this way? Had there once been some kind of furnace here that needed to be closed off from the rest of the house? The walls gave no indication of it, no pipes or holes or vents to indicate it had ever been used for anything logical.

The room unnerved me. Somehow, it felt cavernous, echoing. I could almost feel a draft, coming from...nowhere. A gleam caught my eye and I pulled a coin from the gravel. A Franc, 1982. How odd.

#

Something happened. I sat down to write and then it seemed that days passed without my noticing. Sabrina called me, upset. I was supposed to call her after her doctor's appointment on Friday.

“But it's only Tuesday,” I said.

“You’re losing it, Mom. It’s Sunday.”

Sunday. That couldn’t be. Tuesday I had consoled Alice after she was passed over for the promotion. Tuesday I had made myself a spinach omelet for lunch and let Bronte eat half of it. Tuesday I had emailed my publisher to tell her the first draft was seventy five percent done and the poetry collection would probably be finished sooner.

I remembered Tuesday, even sitting down at my computer around three pm to hash out my next chapter. I didn’t remember anything after that. In fact, I had been sitting in front of my computer, hashing out that chapter when the jangle of my phone had compelled me to answer it, somewhat irritably.

“No, that’s not right,” I said.

“Maybe you can get so stoned you lose track of days, but I am responsible for other people. It’s Sunday. You didn’t call me and I just—”

“What is it, sweetie?” I pushed aside my concern over my mental state.

“Jim’s job is transferring him. To California.”

“Can they do that?”

“If he refuses, then he loses his position.”

“But what about your job? The kids and their school?”

What about me? I left my whole life, every new adventure to spend time with you and the kids.

“I wanted to talk to you about all this when we got the news, but you haven’t answered your phone all week.”

Sunday. It’s Sunday and I couldn’t remember. I glared at the white screen in front of me and my heart quickened in my chest. This hadn’t been the chapter I’d been

working on. This was a new chapter, the last chapter. I had written it all, up to the last line, but I knew what the line would be. The cursor blinked, waiting for me to type it in.

“No,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry I even called!” Sabrina snapped.

“No, honey, not you. I’m just—Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I just thought you would want to know. God! I’m stupid. We hardly see you anyway. Why would I think you cared?”

I sighed as the call ended. My baby girl wouldn’t give up her whole life for some mediocre man’s mediocre career, would she?

And where did that leave me? Should I sell my new place and move with them? Should I drive over there now and beg her to stay? She was right. I had finished out my last semester almost a year ago and since then, I’d barely been to her house, barely been out with her, barely had the kids over.

I stared at the blinking cursor, daring me to write that last line. It felt like a signature on a contract, consenting to the end of everything I’d told myself I wanted.

Frazzled and frustrated I pushed up from my chair and went to the cellar, Bronte on my heels. At least she seemed content with me. I shifted boxes, and swept floors. I cleared the path to the little back room. I dusted up the spider webs and threw out all the trash until the basement was no longer a mess and the little room was clean. I scraped the last layer of dusty cobweb off the blackened beam overhead. Something fell down from the cinder block ledge and clanged on the concrete floor.

I reached down to pick it up. A rupee, with a picture of Queen Victoria on the front. I turned it over in my hand. It felt heavy, like real silver. The back was stamped

with the East India Trading Company logo and the date 1840. Holy crap. I reached up and swept my hand along the ledge and the rafters looking for more coins. I found nothing.

I turned the coin over in my hands again, tension coiling in my shoulders. A breeze blew past me. The room seemed to expand around me, beckoning me to step out further.

But that was stupid. There was nothing here but a storage closet and some old coins.

Nothing else.

#

“Dr. Salem, what is it that you wish to do with your retirement?” The gray-eyed lady regarded me with an uncanny sharpness. “Do you intend to write any more books?”

“No,” I said. “This is my last one.”

It was true. I had nothing left to say. Nothing left to see. Nothing left to learn. All the mysteries and excitement of life were behind me. “I just want to spend time with my family.”

“Perhaps you would be better suited moving with your daughter.”

“We’d kill each other.” I said. “Sabrina’s always felt judged by me.”

“*Is* she judged by you?”

The question caught me off guard and I took a step back, thinking about it as two women in grass green gowns walked by the front desk, waving to the manager.

“Why would she give up her job that she worked so hard to get to move to California?” I blurted.

“Does she like her job?” The manager wrote something in a leather-bound ledger.

“She spent years hustling to get editor-in-chief! She’s the youngest they’ve ever had!”

“Does she like it?”

I didn’t know. “I don’t know that I had ever considered that it mattered. Sabrina was always better than her peers. She should be the most powerful person in any room she walked into.”

“Could it be that your priorities are not hers?” The manager pressed.

I scraped my lower lip with my front teeth. “I’m too hard on her.”

“Could it be, also, Dr. Salem, that her priorities are not yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are new things to see, to learn, to experience, in the members club.” A man in a fine suit, strolled by, giving us an indifferent glance. He disappeared down the dim, cherry paneled hall. “You should receive your invitation soon.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“And you won’t, until you make your choice.”

“I should go live with my daughter in California.”

“Then you’ve made your choice.”

“But...what kind of things could I learn?”

“What indeed.” She smiled thinly at me.

I awoke and marked my notepad. 29.

Alice took Bronte while I flew to California with Sabrina to look at houses. I was uncomfortable leaving her, Bronte being my only companion since I'd retired, but I didn't dare tell Sabrina. I had to play my cards right to get her to let me even have my dog when I moved in with them.

The houses the realtor had lined up for us to look at were big and after the third one I asked Sabrina, "Is this why you're so anxious to move? So you can have one of these SoCal McMansions?"

"Geez Mom," she huffed. "The company is paying for it, so we're looking at what is in the budget."

"These just don't seem like you."

"Yeah, well, you don't really know what seems like me."

"What does that mean?"

"You haven't stopped giving me crap since I told you."

"I just thought you would want more than to be a stay-at-home mother."

"First of all, *Dr. Diana Salem...*" She stopped in the middle of the open-floorplan living room of the Spanish style bungalow we were viewing. The realtor somehow vanished and Sabrina turned to glare at me. "There is nothing wrong with wanting to be home with your children as they grow up."

"I never said there was. Just that—"

"Secondly, I am not going to be a stay-at-home parent. The reason I am moving with my husband is that he will be working flexible hours here, and be able to be home with the kids in the mornings. I will also be working partially at home as a features editor."

“You have a new job lined up?” I felt relief flooding through my chest but then I saw Sabrina’s face.

“You talk so much about family and how you want to spend time with us, but Mom! You retired and wrote a novel and a poetry book. You smoke pot and hang out with your dog all day every day and don’t call me or make plans to take the kids. Why are you even here?”

“You said I should move with you. I am moving with you. I’ll help with the kids and maybe write my memoirs and—”

“You don’t want that! And we don’t need you to help with the kids. You’ve never done it and now we are literally rearranging our whole lives to make more time for them.”

“You don’t want me?”

“Do you want to come here? Settle down and be a stay-at-home grandma?”

There are new things to see, to learn, to experience, in the members club.

“I wish I could have been the kind of mother you wanted.”

She sighed heavily and shook her head. “I am the kind of mother I wanted. You are a good mother though. You just are kinda selfish too.”

“I would like the kids to come visit. And I can come visit. And you have to come home for the holidays.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” I echoed. It wasn’t what I imagined. I thought I would spend every day with my daughter. Do all the things I felt guilty for not doing when she was a child.

But she wasn’t a child anymore, and she had her own children handled.

It was too late to be that person.

What should I be, then?

#

My flight got in at six pm, and I didn't get home until nine. Dog tired, I left my luggage in the car and let myself in the front door, carrying only my pocketbook and a poetry collection I'd picked up in California.

My dark home seemed to yawn as I opened the door, smiling in welcome as I walked in and turned on the light.

My eyes immediately found the brass key glinting on the cluttered kitchen island.

It was the size of any house key, uncut at the bottom but the top was stamped with an eye, sort of like the illuminati on the dollar, but with three triangles above it instead of beams of light, and the corner of the eye curled like the cat-eye liner my eldest granddaughter wore.

I had never seen this symbol before.

I didn't need to ponder over it though. I knew what it was.

My invitation.

I was tempted to rush it downstairs and see if it fit into some crack in the wall in the cellar room.

Not yet.

I had obligations yet to fulfill.

#

I sat in Alice's formal living room and drank English tea that she'd learned how to make when she'd studied in Oxford back in the eighties. Alice had been excited to see me, not

just because she was not used to shepherd-husky-poodle mixes who stole garbage and prime rib off the table. She'd been offered a contract at a small private school in New York while I'd been away.

"I thought with you leaving to try something new, I should follow suit."

I didn't tell her I would be staying. I wasn't sure I really would be.

I was happy for her. We made indefinite plans to go out for drinks before she left.

I hugged Bronte tightly to me when we got into the car. I cried a bit on the drive home.

I'd planned out my life. Work, college and grad school. No children until I had my PhD and a position lined up. A perfect house. A perfect marriage. Three kids with great educations and manners and three languages and summers traveling the world.

Get published. Get tenured. Build a great department. Elevate other women, other talent. Make the world a better place and be there for my children, for their emotional, mental and physical well-being.

Be a great spouse and lover. Support my husband as he supports me.

Retire in my sixties and help raise my grandchildren while my children pursue their own careers.

But as soon as I'd gotten married, became responsible for other people, I'd started missing my marks. I'd only managed to have one child. I hadn't been there for her like I'd thought I would, and I'd failed at my marriage too.

Maybe I'd never learned to negotiate my own goals to accommodate the people I loved.

Maybe I wasn't a bad person for that, but just a person with priorities and needs that were all my own. My ex had been a decent father. Together we'd raised a pretty great woman in Sabrina, and because of our failings, maybe she would do better than me. That was enough.

But I wasn't ready to be done yet.

I slid the Franc and the Rupee into the pocket of my jeans and then I picked up the brass key.

Bronte followed me down the stairs. To the back of the cellar and to the particle board door. I called her to my side and opened it.

I pulled the string on the hanging bulb and Bronte let out an incredulous snort.

On the back wall, set into the cinderblock, was a thick wood door, carved with a cat-lined eye with three triangles over top. Coins from all times and locations were spilled from the seam beneath it, and from somewhere on the other side I could hear music and the roar of conversation.

I slid the key into a slot and it disappeared. The heavy brass knob turned. I took Bronte's collar.

"Let's go," I whispered as the door creaked open.

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