

Doors, in Real Simple

I sleep the sleep of pregnant women. Do-not-disturb, come-back-later, I'm-growing-a-baby sleep. I'm tired past muscles and tendons and organs. Tired to the bone.

Incessant knocking at my front door wakes me, but still in a dream, I think it's Kent. He has a key, so I yank the covers up under my chin, curl as small as I can against my bulging belly, and start to slip back to sleep. He'll let himself in.

But the knocking doesn't stop.

Digital numbers on the clock radio glow: 1 a.m.

The knocker rings the doorbell, too.

Pissed at being woken late at night, groggy and disoriented, I finally haul my round self out of bed and yank on gray sweat bottoms and my favorite faded red St. Mary's College sweatshirt. I flick on the hall light and half-stumble down carpeted stairs.^[L T T L]_[SEP:SEP]

"Coming!" I yell to the knocker on the other side of the metal front door that rings hollow with each fist pound. "Shit."

Teetering on tiptoe, I spy out the fish-eye peephole, my lunar belly squished against the door.^[L T T L]_[SEP:SEP]

A man dressed all in black—black shoes, black slacks, black coat, everything black except a rectangle of white on his collar—stamps his feet against the cold. With the porch light on and snow falling behind him, he has this faint glow.^[L T T L]_[SEP:SEP]

My stomach acid rises. I gulp hard, fighting the urge to throw up. I feel like I've swallowed a boulder.^[L T T L]_[SEP:SEP]

I don't want to open the door. Somehow I think if I don't let the white-collared stranger in, he can't tell me what my gut already knows.

I gulp. Twice. I smooth the front of my sweatshirt, pulling down the hem to be sure my stomach is covered before I inch the door open. In that beat of time between eyeing the chaplain and forcing myself to let him in, my life changes. The sweetness of my last time with Kent, just a few hours ago, slips away. Already it wasn't mine.

Kent came to my six-month baby checkup, watched me get weighed and measured and lectured about gaining too much weight. "You'll slow down on the fries?" Dr. Pettygrove asked, and I nodded yes, sure, uh-huh, while planning my next fry stop at Wendy's.

Swish, swish went the baby's heartbeat. Kent smiled so big, all of his crooked front teeth showed, and his aquamarine blue eyes looked even more aqua, more marine. "It's incredible," he half-sighed in wonder. My science-minded husband was all mush: "I love this baby. I can't wait to meet him."

We left the doctor's office, snugged our winter coats tight, tucked our arms around each other's waists, and strolled to the parking lot. He was going to climb in his Honda Prelude and drive to Crystal Mountain for a little night skiing; I was going to pop in my VW Bug and head home to grade a heap of student papers.

We stalled in the parking lot, our arms and legs laced together. I pressed my ear into his chest, and even through his scratchy wool jacket, I counted his heartbeats—*boom, boom, boom*. Love and life were fat with possibilities.

"Love you, baby," he said.

And I thought for a moment that he meant me, but he never called me Baby or Babe. We weren't the Honey, Sweetie, Cutie Pie name-callers. It was Annie or Brussels Sprout or, on one night when he had had too much tequila, Liebchen.

He spread his hand wide, fingers splayed, on my firm belly, and in that instant I knew he meant the baby. "God, I love you, Annie."

"I love you back."

"And I love you front," he said with a laugh, pulling me closer. The baby smacked a tiny hard baby part—head or foot or tush—against my belly, whapping me from the inside out and Kent from the outside in.

"Ooh, felt that," Kent said, all smiles. "Do it again, baby." My gut pinched. Not from the baby. Not that kind of feeling. It was a nervous feeling. Something was wrong.

Kent pulled back just enough to see my face. "You OK?" he asked, with raised eyebrows.

Moment of truth. Did I tell him I had an icky feeling and I wanted him to stay home, put up his feet, and watch bad TV with me? Should I tell him not to ski—not tonight?

"I just need you," I said. "We both do." And I rubbed my belly so there was no doubt who made up the "we."

"I'll be home before you know it," Kent said, with a smile. "You'll be sleeping that dead-to-the-world sleep you sleep—and I'll slip in beside you. You'll hardly know I was gone."

For years my huge regret—the one that grew big and black, grew fangs and claws, grew a voice that howled and screeched—was letting my husband go skiing the night he died. He would have stayed home if I had insisted.

^[L]_[SEP] What if I had kept him home? What if I had told him how nervous I was? What if I had told him he needed to guard his safety like I was guarding mine? What if I had been honest with him? With myself? What if I had held him longer? Shorter? Would he have missed that patch of black ice? Would his car have stayed on the road, rather than skidding across the yellow line and crashing?

It took me years to ask better questions. What if I wasn't powerful enough to change anything that happened? What if it was Kent's time? What if 36 years was the right number of years for him? What if his death was his own and had nothing to do with me?

Slowly, oh so slowly, my ache, my enormous sack of regret started to shrink like it had an undetectable leak. Pieces of it fell behind me as I moved forward.

Our son, Jake, was born. A beautiful, healthy, yummy baby boy. I crawled out of bed to love him, to feed and change him, to pace with him in the middle of the night when neither of us could sleep. I sometimes pictured him as an adult telling his therapist: "My dad died before I was born and my mom went crazy." I couldn't leave him that legacy.^[L]_[SEP]

I grieved hard and wide. Cried oceans and rivers and lakes and ponds and puddles and swimming pools, too. I broke dishes, shredded papers, gave away Kent's clothes and backpack and skis.

I didn't want to open the door to the chaplain that night, but I had to. And in time it led me here, to this door: Scot. Jake. Maria. Sweet, sweet, sweet.