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Beyond the Door

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A mother takes her daughter to start college. The mother will stay at a motel for the weekend. In the dormitory, wandering around the dormitory, dreaming along the hallway while the daughter flirts with her new roommate—lost in an alley of doors that won’t take her back . . . the mother comes upon a janitor’s closet. A mother closing herself in a small room with a basin, for no reason, except that neither faucet will rinse her out of this narrowing corridor to old age: both have cold water. She stands there sweating. When she started college, the world was a bright, unfolding idea between her and something like God—full of ramifications; her nipples had led her around the green, trimmed lawns as though she were music. Tomorrow night she will drive two hundred miles to another dead end, hot and cold running water and three channels between four walls and a husband not on fire, and the music behind her nipples shrunk into her cellulites and weary clitoris . . .

Ah, but now. Feet along the hallway—so she holds the doorknob shut; her daughter’s new friends might think she has a mother who drinks. The sounds stop. A pressure on the knob, which the mother grips against; something hisses. Something mutters, and behind it the sense of desperation, a pleading emanates through the wood or keyhole, and the woman—the young girl crusted outward to be a mother, the frightened anima inside the forty-two-year-old sentence of flesh—relaxes her fingers. The doorknob spins

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like a telephone call to heaven, and the wood slab,
slightly narrower than a coffin lid,
blurs open

to reveal a man standing there with a hand
inside his jacket. "Just ... little
nip," he says; he grins askew and shows her the half-pint
of vodka. She pulls him gently
by the other wrist and closes the door. She takes
the vodka and empties it down the sink.
"Hey—!" But her left hand
has moved from his wrist to his crotch, and more gently
than she had fondled memories of her virginity,
as though it were a cigar
she wants to give God for a present, the mother
careses him. The man starts crying.
His breath is sour, the face steeped in more flesh than she would prefer.
"Once I ... was—seventeen," he tells her.
She caresses him. "I was just a girl.
I bought a college sweatshirt," she whispers.
They hear feet along the hallway. Something
pulls on the knob, and moments later the two of them
release it and step further inside the closet.
A man or woman enters. Someone touches
the newcomer's genitals, and a murmuring begins,
almost like a hymn, and new footsteps beyond the door...