

THE DARK LAND

by

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For want of anything better to do, and in the spirit that keeps my room austere and tidy when there are other things I should be doing, I decided to move my bed. After returning from college I'd redecorated my room, as it had been the same since I'd been about ten, and I'd moved just about everything round except for the bed. I knew it was largely an excuse for not doing anything more constructive but pulled it away from the wall and tried it in another couple of positions.

It was hard work, as one of the legs is rather fragile and the thing had to be virtually lifted off the floor, and after half an hour I was hot and irritated and becoming more and more convinced that its original position had been the optimal, and indeed the only, place to put it. And it was as I struggled to shove it back up against the wall that I began to feel a bit strange. When it was finally back in place I sat down on it, feeling light-headed and a bit ill and I suppose basically I just drifted off to sleep.

I don't know if the bed is part of it in some way. I only mention it because it seems important, and I guess that it was while I was asleep on it that it all began. After a while I woke up, half-remembering a dream in which I had been doing nothing more than lying on my bed remembering that my parents had said that they were going to extend the wood panelling on the downstairs hall walls. For a few moments I was disorientated, confused by being in the same place in reality as I had been in the dream, and then I drifted off again.

Some time later I awoke again, feeling very sluggish and slightly nauseous. I found it very difficult to haul my mind up from sleep, but eventually stood up and lurched across the room to the sink to get a glass of water, rubbing my eyes and feeling very rough. Maybe I was going down with something. I decided that a cup of tea would be a good idea, and headed out of the bedroom to go downstairs to the kitchen to make one.

As I reached the top of the stairs I remembered the dream about the panelling and wondered vaguely where a strange idea like that could have come from. I'd worked hard for my psychology paper at college, and was fairly confident that Freud hadn't felt that wood panelling was even worth a mention. I trudged downstairs, still feeling a bit strange, my thoughts dislocated and confused.

Then I stopped, open-mouthed, and stared around me. They really *had* extended the panelling. It used to only go about eight feet up the wall, but it now soared right up to the front hall ceiling, which is two floors high. And they'd done it in exactly the same wood as the original panelling: there wasn't a join to be seen. How the hell had they managed that? Come to that, *when* had they managed that? It hadn't been there that morning, both my parents were at work and would be for hours and ... well, it was just impossible, wasn't it? I reached out and touched the wood, marvelling at how even the grain was the same, and that the new wood looked just as aged as the original, which had been there fifty years.

As I struggled to get my still sluggish mind in gear surprise suddenly gave way to astonishment. Wait a minute, I thought, that isn't right. There hadn't used to be *any* panelling in the hall. It used just to be white walls. Sure, the stairs were panelled in wood, but the walls were just plain white plaster. How the hell could I have forgotten that? What had made me think that the front hall had been panelled, and think it so unquestioningly? I could now remember that I'd recently noticed, sensitised to these things as I was by having recently repainted my room, that the white paint in the hall was rather dirty, especially round the light switches. So what was all this panelling doing here? Where had it come from, and when, for Christ's sake? And why had I been so sure that at least some of it had always been there?

I walked slowly into the kitchen, casting bewildered backward glances at the walls. I heard a soft clinking sound outside and walked to the back door, too puzzled about the front hall to even notice that it was rather late for a milk delivery. The back door, which like the front door opens out onto the driveway, is in a little corridor full of gardening implements, shoes and tools which leads off the kitchen to the garage. I threaded my way through these and wrenched the stiff door open.

As soon as it was open I reeled backwards from the light and unthinkingly crouched just inside the back hall. Then I realised that it wasn't even that bright outside: it was late afternoon and the light was muted, but everything seemed very intense, like colours before a storm. Odd, but not odd enough to throw yourself to the ground over, I thought as I stood up. But it had been the milkman after all, for there was our milk bottle holder with four bottles of milk in it. Only they weren't milk bottles, but large American-style quart containers somehow jammed into slots meant to take pints. And someone had taken the silver tops off.

Something at the edge of my vision caught my attention and I looked up towards the top of the driveway. There, about thirty yards away, were two children, one fat and on a bike, the other slim and standing. I was seized with a sudden irrational fury and started quickly up the drive towards them, convinced that the clinking sound I'd heard was them stealing the tops off the milk.

I had covered scarcely five yards when from behind me someone who'd been at my school walked quickly and inexplicably past me up the drive, staring straight ahead. I couldn't remember his name, had barely known him, in fact.

He'd been two or three years older than me, and I'd completely forgotten that he'd existed, but as I stared after him I remembered that he'd been one of the more amiable seniors. I could recall being proud of having some small kind of communication with one of the big boys and how it had made me feel a bit older myself, more a man of the world, less of a kid. And I remembered the way he used to greet my yelling a nickname greeting at him, a half-smile and the raising of an eyebrow.

All this came back with the instantaneous impact of memory, but something wasn't right. He didn't smile at all, or even seem to register that I was there. I felt oddly disturbed and chilled, not by the genuinely strange fact that he was there at all, or that he was wearing school athletic gear when he must have left the school seven years ago, but because he didn't smile and tilt his head back the way he used to. It was so bizarre that I wondered briefly if I was dreaming, but if you can ask yourself the question you always know the answer, and I wasn't.

My attention was distracted on the other side by a reflection in the glass of the window in the back hallway. A man with glasses, a chubby face and blond hair that looked as if it had been cut with a basin seemed to be standing behind me, carrying a bicycle. I whirled round to face where he should have been, but he wasn't there. Then I remembered the kids at the top of the driveway and, seeing that they were still standing motionless, began to shout at them again, needing something to take my bewilderment out on.

Almost immediately a tall slim man in a dark suit came walking down the drive. I don't know if it was a trick of the light in the gathering dusk, but I couldn't seem to fix on his face. In retrospect it was as if an unnatural shadow hung there but at the time my eyes just seemed to slide off it as if it were slippery, or made of ice.

"Stop shouting at them," the man said as he passed me, walking towards the back door. I stared at him open-mouthed. "They're not doing anything wrong. Leave them alone."

The kids took themselves off, the one walking beside the other on the bike, and I turned to the suited man, anxious, for some reason, to placate him, and yet at the same time slightly outraged at his invasion of our property.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just, well, I'm a bit thrown. I thought I saw someone I knew in the drive. Did you see him? Sort of wavy brown hair, athletics gear?"

For some reason I thought that the man would say that he had, and that that would make me feel better, but all I got was a curt "No". I was by now looking at his back as he entered the back hallway.

"Shall we go into your old house then?" asked another voice, clearly talking to the suited man, and I saw that someone else was in the back hall: the man with the blond hair and glasses. And he really was carrying a bicycle, for God's sake.

"What?" I said incredulously, and hurried after them, catching a glimpse of the suited man's face. "But it's you ..." I continued, baffled, as I realised that the man in the suit was the man who had been in athletics gear. The two men walked straight into the kitchen and I followed them, quietly, and seemingly impotently, enraged. *Was* this his old house? Even if it was, wasn't it customary to ask the current occupants if you fancied a visit?

The suited man was by now peering round the kitchen, where for some reason everything looked very messy. He poked at some fried rice I'd left in a frying pan on the stove, or at least I seemed to have left it there, though I wasn't sure when I would have done so. Again I felt the urge to placate and hoped he would eat some, but he just grimaced with distaste and joined the other man at the window looking out onto the drive, hands on hips, his back to me.

"Dear God," he muttered, and the other man grunted in agreement.

I noticed that I'd picked up the milk from outside the back door, and appeared to have spilt some of it on the floor. I tried to clean it up with a piece of kitchen roll which seemed very dirty and yellowed as if with age, my mind aching under the strain of trying to work out what the hell was going on. I felt that there must be some sense to it somewhere, some logic of the situation that I was missing. Even if he had lived here once he had no right to just march in here with his friend like that, but I realised as I continued ineffectively trying to swab up the milk before he noticed it (why?) that there was something far wrong than a mere breach of protocol going on here. The suited man looked about thirty-five, far older than he should have been if he was indeed the man I'd been to school with, and yet far too young to ever have lived here, as between our family and the people we'd bought it from, the house's last 40 years were accounted for. So how the hell could it be his house? There was no way. And was it him anyway? Apart from being too old, it looked like him, but was it actually *him*?

As I straightened up, having done the best I could with the milk, I staggered slightly, feeling very disorientated and strange, my perception both heightened and jumbled at the same time, as if I was very drunk. Everything seemed to have a nightmarish intensity and exaggerated emotional charge, and yet there also seemed to be gaps in what I was perceiving, as if I was only taking in an edited version of what was going on. Things began to appear to jump from one state to another, with the bits in between, the becoming, missed out like a series of jump cuts. I felt hot and dizzy and the kitchen looked small and indescribably messy and the orange paint of the walls seemed to jump in at me beneath a low swaying ceiling. I wondered confusedly if I was seeing the kitchen as they saw it, and then immediately wondered what I meant by that.

All the time they just stood there, turning round occasionally to stare balefully at me, radiating distaste and impatience. Obviously they were waiting for something. But what? What was going on? Noticing I still had the piece of kitchen roll in my hand I stepped over all the rubbish on the floor – what the hell had been going on in this kitchen? – to put it in the overflowing bin. Then, squeezing my temples with my fingers and struggling both to concentrate and to stand upright against the weight of the air I turned towards the men.

"L-look," I stuttered, "what the hell is going on?" and immediately wished I hadn't. There was a pause and then the suited man turned his head very slowly towards me and it kept turning and turning until he was facing me while his body stayed facing the other way. I could feel my stomach trying to crawl away and fought against the gagging. He'd

done that deliberately, done it because he knew it would make me want to throw up, and I thought he might just be right.

“Why don’t you just shut up?” he snarled, the words squirming from his mouth like rats out of the stomach of something recently dead, and twisted his head slowly back round through 180 degrees until he was looking out onto the drive once more.

Meanwhile, the mess in the kitchen seemed to be getting worse. Every time I looked there were more dirty pans and bits of rubbish and old food on the floor. My head was getting thicker and heavier and felt like it was slipping away from me. I half fell against the fridge and clung to it, almost pulling it off the wall, and began to cry, my tears cutting channels in the thick grime on the fridge door. I dimly remembered that we’d bought a new fridge the week before but they must have changed it because this one looked like something out of the fifties, but it was hard to tell because it was swimming back and forth and there was a lot of white in my eyes and I couldn’t see past it. They were both watching me now.

Suddenly a terrible jangling pierced my ear, as if someone were hammering a pencil into it. It happened again and I recognised it first as a sound and not a blow after all, and then as the doorbell. Someone was at the front door.

The two men glanced at each other and then the blond one nodded. The suited man turned to me.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s the front door,” I said, trying to please him.

“Yes. So you’d better answer it, hadn’t you? Answer the *door*.”

“Should I answer it?” I said, stupidly. I just couldn’t seem to remember what words meant any more.

“Yes,” he grated and then picked up a mug, my mug, the mug I came down, I remembered randomly, to put tea in, and hurled it at me. It smashed into the fridge door by my face. I struggled to stand upright, my head aching and ears ringing, hearing a soft crump as a fragment of the mug broke under my foot. Then the doorbell jangled again, its harsh sharpness making me realise how muted sounds had been becoming. I fell rather than stepped towards the kitchen door, sliding across the front of the fridge, my feet tangling in the boxes and cartons that now seemed to cover the filthy floor. I could feel the orange of the walls seeping in through my ears and mouth and kept missing whole seconds as if I was blacking out and coming to like a stroboscope. As I banged into the door and grabbed the handle to hold myself up I heard the blond man say,

“He may not go through. If he does, we wait.”

But it didn’t mean anything to me. None of it did.

Stepping clumsily over more piles of rubbish I headed for the front door. The chime of the doorbell had pushed the air hard and I could see it coming towards me in waves. Ducking, I slipped on the mat and almost fell into the living room on hands and knees. But it was getting dark in there, I could see, really dark, and I could hear the plants talking. I couldn’t catch the words, but they were there, beneath the night sounds and a soft rustling which sounded a hundred yards away. The living room must have grown, I thought groggily, picking myself up and turning myself to the front door as the bell clanged again. It should be about four paces across the hall from the living room door to the front door but I thought it was only going to take one and then it took twenty, past all the panelling and over the huge folds in the mat. And then I had my hand on the doorknob and then the door was open and I stepped out of the house.

“Oh hello Michael. I thought someone must be in, because all the lights were on.”

“Wuh?” I said, blinking in the remnants of sunlight, breathless with the feeling of my mind soaring up towards normality like a runaway lift. Then “Sorry?”

“I hope I didn’t disturb you?” the woman standing in front of me said, and I now recognised her to be Mrs. Steinburg, the woman who brings us our catfood in bulk.

“No, no, that’s fine. Fine,” I said, looking covertly behind me into the hall, which was solid and unpanelled and four paces wide and led to the living room which was light and about ten yards deep. Good. Think about that later. Deal with the cat woman.

“I’ve brought your delivery,” she said. “Look, are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine,” I replied, smiling broadly. “I ... er ...” I ... er ... what? “I ... er ... just nodded off for a moment, in the kitchen. I still feel a bit, you know ...”

“Of course.” Mrs. Steinburg smiled. I followed her up the drive and heaved the box of catfood out of the back of her van, looking carefully back at the house. There was nothing to see. I thanked her and then carried the box back down the drive as she drove off.

I walked back into the house and shut the front door behind me. I felt absolutely fine. I walked into the kitchen. Normal. It didn’t even occur to me to wonder if the two men would still be there. They weren’t. I must just have fallen asleep making tea, and then struggled over to the front door to open it while still half asleep. I could remember asking myself if it was a dream and thinking it wasn’t but that just showed how wrong you could be, didn’t it? It had been unusually vivid, and it was odd how I’d been suddenly awake and all right again as soon as I stepped out of the front door. Odd, and a bit disconcerting. But here I was in the kitchen again and everything was normal, clean and tidy, spick and span, with all the rubbish in the bin and the pans in the right places and the milk in the fridge and a smashed mug on the floor.

Suddenly I didn’t feel quite so good. It was my mug, and it was smashed, on the floor, at the bottom of the fridge. Now how had that happened? Maybe I’d fallen asleep holding it (fallen asleep standing up with a mug in my hand? Now how likely was that?), maybe I’d knocked it over waking up and incorporated the sound into my dream (better, better, but where exactly was I supposed to have fallen asleep? Just leaning against the counter, or actually stretched

out on it with the kettle as a pillow?) Then I noticed the fridge door.

There was a little dent in it, with a couple of flecks of paint missing. At about head height.

That wasn't good. That wasn't good at all. In fact it felt as if someone had just punched a hole in my chest and poured icy water into it. But everything else was all right, wasn't it? I cleared up the mug and switched the kettle on and while it was boiling wandered into the hall and the living room. Everything was fine, tidy, normal. Super. Back into the kitchen. The same. Great. Apart from a little dent in the fridge door at about head height.

I made my cup of tea, though not in my mug of course, and drank it standing looking out of the kitchen window at the drive, feeling unsettled and nervous, and unsure of what to do with either of those emotions. Even if it had been a dream, it was odd, particularly the way it had fought so hard against melting away. Maybe I was much more tired than I realised. Or maybe I was ill. But I felt fine, physically at least.

I carried the box of catfood into the pantry, unpacked it, and stacked the cans in the corner. Then I switched the kettle on for another cup of tea. Suddenly my heart seemed to stop and before I had time to realise why, the cause repeated itself. A soft chinking noise outside the back door.

I moved quickly to the window and looked out. Nothing. I craned my neck, trying to see round to the back door, but could only see the large pile of firewood that lay to one side of it. The noise again.

Clenching my fists I walked slowly into the back hallway and listened. Silence, except for the sound of blood beating in my ears. My stomach knotting and hands moist with perspiration. Then I grabbed the knob and swung the door open. Stillness. Just a rectangle of late afternoon light, a patch of driveway, a dark hedge waving quietly. I stepped out into the drive.

A very faint crunching noise. And then again. Sounded almost like pebbles rubbing against each other. Again. I looked more closely at the drive, peering at the actual stones, and then noticed that a very small patch about ten yards in front of me appeared to be moving slightly, wriggling, almost. As I watched they stopped, and then the sound came again and another patch, about a yard closer than the first, stirred briefly. As if registering the weight of invisible feet. I was so engrossed that I didn't notice the whistling straight away. When I did, I looked up.

The blond man was back. Standing at the top of the driveway, carrying a bicycle with the wheels slowly spinning in the dusk, whistling the top line of two in perfect harmony, the lower line just the wind. As I stared at him, backing slowly towards the house, the crunching noise got louder and louder and then the suited man was standing with his nose almost touching mine.

"Hello again," he said.

The blond man started down the driveway, smiling.

"Hello again indeed," he said. "Come on, in we go."

Suddenly I realised that the very last thing in the world I should do was let those two back into the house. I leapt through the back door back into the hallway. The suited man, caught by surprise, started forward but I was quick and whipped the door shut in his face and locked it. That felt very good but then he started banging on the door very hard, ridiculously hard, grotesquely hard, and I noticed that to my right the kitchen was getting messy again and the fridge was old and I could barely see out of the window because it was so grimy and a slight flicker made me think that maybe I'd missed the smallest fraction of a second and I realised that it really hadn't been a fucking dream and I was back there, and I was back there because I'd come in through the back door again. As I backed into the kitchen I tripped and fell, sprawling amongst the cartons and bacon rind and the dirt and was that puke, for Christ's sake? The banging on the back door got louder and louder and louder. He was going to break it. He was going to break the fucking door down. I'd let them back and they had to come in through the back door. I'd come in through the wrong door ...

Suddenly realising what I must do, I scrambled up and kicked my way through the rubbish towards the door to the front hall. The fridge door swung open in my way and the inside was dark and dirty and there was something rotted in there but I slammed it out of the way, biting hard on my lip to keep my head clear. I had to get to the front door, I had to open it, step out, and then step back in again. That was the right door. And I had to do it soon, before the back door broke and let them in. As I ran out of the kitchen into the front hall I could already hear a splintering quality to the sound of the blows. And the back door was about two inches thick.

The hallway was worse than I expected. I came to a halt, at first unable to even see the front door. Then I thought that I must be looking in the wrong direction but I wasn't, because there it was over to the left where it was supposed to be, but the angles were all wrong and to see it I had to look behind me and to the right, although when I saw it I could see that it was still over there to the left. And it looked so close, could it really be less than a yard away, but when I held my hand out to it I groped into nothing, my hand still in front of the door when it should have been past it. I stared wildly around me, disorientated and unsure somehow even of which way to go. Then the banging behind me got even louder, probably as the blond man joined in, and this helped marginally to restore my sense of direction. I found the door again, concentrated hard on its apparent position and started to walk towards it. I immediately fell over, because the floor was much lower than I expected, and in fact must be tilted in some way as one of my legs reached it easily enough, although it looked flat and level. I pulled myself up onto my knees and found I was looking at a sort of sloped wall between the wall and the ceiling, a wall which bent back from the wall and yet out from the ceiling. And the door was still over there on the left, although to see it I now had to look straight ahead and up.

Then I noticed another sound beneath the eternal banging and whirled round to face the direction it was coming from. I found that I was looking through the living room door and that it gave into sheer darkness, a darkness which was seeping out into the hallway like smoke, clinging to the angles in the air like the inside of a dark prism. I heard the noise again and it was a deep rumbling growling far far away in there, almost obscured by the night noises and the

sound of vegetation moving in the wind. It didn't seem to be getting any closer but I knew that was because the living room now extended out far beyond, into hundreds and hundreds of miles of dense forest jungle, and as I listened carefully I could hear the gurgling of some dark river far off to the right, mixing with the warm rustling of the breeze in the darkness. It sounded very peaceful and for a moment I was still, transfixed.

Then the sound of a violently splintering crack wrenched me away and I turned my back on the living room and flailed towards where the front door must be. The hall table loomed above me and I thought I could walk upright beneath it but tripped over it trying and fell again, headlong onto the cool floorboards. The mat had moved, no, was moving, sliding slowly up the stairs like a draft and as I rolled over and looked at the ceiling I saw the floor coming towards me, the walls shortening in little jerks. Another splintering thud and now I had no idea which way was up.

As I lay there panting a clear cool waft of air stroked my cheek. At first I thought that it must have come from the living room, although it had been warm in there, but then I remembered rather than saw that I was lying on the floor and that the breeze must be a draught coming under the front door. I must nearly be there. I looked all around me but all I could see was panelling and floor and what was behind me. I closed my eyes and tried to grope for it but it was even worse inside so I opened them again. Then I caught a glimpse of the door, far away, obscured from view round a corner but visible once you knew where to look. On impulse I reached my hand out in not quite the opposite direction and felt it fall upon warm grainy wood. The door, the bloody door. I'd found the front door.

I pulled myself along the floor towards it and tried to stand up. I got no more than a few inches before I fell back down again. I tried again with the same result, feeling as if I was trying to do something very unnatural and bizarre. Again, and this time I reached a semi-crouching position, muscles straining. I started to slump down again but as I did so I threw myself forwards and found myself curled up, my feet a couple of feet from the floor, lying on the door. Forcing my mind not to even try to come to terms with this I groped by my side and found the doorknob. I tried to twist it but the sweat on my hands made them spin uselessly on the shiny metal. I wiped them on my shirt and tried again and this time I got some purchase and heard the catch withdraw as the knob turned. Exultantly I tugged at it as with a tremendous crash the back door finally gave way.

The door wouldn't budge. Panicking, I tried again. Nothing. By peering down the crack I could see that no lock or bolt was impeding it, so why wouldn't it bloody move?

Footsteps in the back hall. Suddenly I realised that I was lying on the door, and trying to pull it towards me against my own weight. Silly me. The footsteps reached the kitchen.

I rolled over off the door onto the wall beside it and reached for the handle but I'd gone too far. As the footsteps came closer, towards the kitchen door into the hall, I scrambled across the slippery wall, grabbed and twisted the doorknob with all my strength. It opened just as they entered the hall and I rolled out through it, fell and landed awkwardly and painfully on something hard and bristly and for a few moments had no clear idea of where or who I was and just lay there fighting for breath.

After some time I sat up slowly. I was sitting on the doormat, my back to the front door. At the top of the drive a passing couple were staring at me curiously. I stood up and smiled, trying to suggest that I often sat there and that they ought to try it as it really was a lot of fun, hoping to God that they hadn't seen me fall there from about two-thirds of the way up the door. They smiled back and carried on walking, mollified or maybe even hurrying off home to try it for themselves, for all I knew. I turned hesitantly back towards the door and looked in.

It had worked. It was all right again. The mat was on the floor, right angles looked like 90 degrees again and the ceiling was back where it was supposed to be. I stepped back a pace and looked across at the back door. It had been utterly smashed and now looked like little more than an extension of the firewood pile.

I walked back into the hall through the front door, the right door, and shut it behind me. I wandered carefully and quietly into the living room and the kitchen. Everything was fine, everything was normal. Just a nice normal house. If you came in through the right door.

The wrong door was in about a thousand pieces now, of course. I thought about that for some time, with a cup of tea and what felt like my first cigarette in months. Less than an hour had elapsed, I saw with frank disbelief, since I'd first come downstairs.

The wrong door. It was coming in through there that took me to wherever or whatever it was that the house became. Coming in through the front door brought me back to wherever it was that I normally lived. So presumably I was safe so long as I didn't leave the house and come back in through the back door. They couldn't get me.

Presumably. But I didn't like having that door in pieces. The wrong door, the door through which they had to come, was in pieces. Being safe was only part of the problem. I wasn't going to feel *secure* until that portal was well and truly closed. It wasn't precisely clear, however, what I could do about that.

I walked into the back hall and looked nervously out through the wreckage onto the drive. Everything was fine. There was nothing I needed protecting from. But I didn't like it. Did it have to be me who came through it, or what if maybe a falling leaf or even just a soft breeze came inside? Would that be enough? Could I take the risk?

As I stood there indecisively I noticed once more the pile of firewood propped up against the outside wall of the back hall. I probably still wouldn't have thought of it had not a very large proportion of the pile been old thick planks. I looked at the tool shelf on the inside wall and saw a hammer and a big box of good long nails. Then I looked at the wood again.

I could nail the damn thing shut.

I flicked my cigarette butt out onto the drive and rolled up my sleeves. The hammer was big and heavy, which was just as well because when I nailed the planks across the door frame I'd be hammering into solid brickwork. I was going to have to board right the way up but that was all right as there were loads of planks, and if I reinforced it enough it

should be well-nigh impregnable. Feeling much better now that I had a way of sealing off the door, I set to work. I may even have hummed.

Kneeling just inside the door, I reached out and began pulling planks in, taking care to select the thickest and least weathered. I judged that I'd need about thirty-five to make the doorway really secured, although that was largely guesswork as I'd never tried to turn the back hall into a fortress before. Getting the planks in was heavy work as I had to stretch out to reach them, and I began to get hot and tired, and anxious to begin the nailing. Outside it was getting darker as the evening began, and the air was very cool and still.

As the pile in the back hall increased in size it became more difficult still, and I had to lean further and further out to reach the next plank, and this made me nervous. I was still inside, my feet were still on the ground in the back hall. I wasn't 'coming back in', I was just leaning out and then, well, sort of coming back in but not really, because my feet never left the back hall, did they? But it made me nervous, and I began to work quicker and quicker, perspiration running down my face and arms as, clinging to the doorframe with my left hand, I stretched out to bring the last few boards in. I felt tired and irritated and was dying for a smoke but couldn't take the time: I was anxious to start nailing. Thirty-one, thirty-two, just a couple more. Now the last one I could possibly reach: that would have to be enough. Hooking my left foot behind the frame and gripping it hard with my left hand I stretched out towards the plank, my waving fingers little more than an inch from the end. Just a little further forward: I let my hooking foot slide round slightly, let my fingers slip round half an inch and tried to extend my back as far as it would go. My fingers just scraping the end I tried a last yearning lunge.

And then suddenly a stray thought struck me. Here I was, pulled out as if on some invisible rack: why on earth hadn't I just gone out of the front door, picked up piles of wood and brought them back into the house through the front door? It would have been easier, it would have been quicker, and it wouldn't have involved all this monkeying around at the wrong door. Not that it mattered now, because as it happened even if I didn't get this last plank I'd probably have plenty, but I wouldn't have been so hot and tired and it was also a bit worrying that in my haste I'd been putting myself in needless danger. I'd better slow down, calm down, take a rest.

An unimportant, contemplative thought. But one that distracted me for a fraction of a second too long. As I finally got the tips of my fingers round the plank I realised with horror that my other fingers, the ones on the doorframe, were slipping. I was slowly sliding forwards. Desperately I tried to scrabble with my fingers, but my hands were too sweaty and the doorframe itself was slippery now. I felt the tendons in my hands stretch as I tried to defy my centre of gravity and think my weight backwards, and then suddenly my forehead walloped onto the ground and I was lying flat on my face.

I was up in a second, and I swear to God that both feet never left the hall floor at once. I hurled myself back into the hallway, clutching that last bloody piece of wood without even noticing it.

Panting and almost sobbing with nervous hysteria I crouched in the doorframe, looking out. Everything looked normal. The driveway was quiet, the pebbles were still and there was none of the faint deadening of sound that I associated with the other place. I was furious with myself for having taken the risk, for not having thought to bring them in through the front door, and especially for falling, which had been bloody painful quite apart from anything else. But I hadn't fallen out, not really. I hadn't come back in, as such. The drive was fine, the kitchen was fine. Everything was fine.

Soothed by the sounds of early evening traffic in the distance, my heart gradually slowing down to only about twice its normal rate, I began to feel a bit better and had a quiet cup of tea, perched on the pile of planks. In falling over my right foot had caught the tool shelf and there were nails all over the place, inside and out, but there were plenty left and the ones outside could bloody stay there. I wasn't going to make the same damnfool mistake twice.

Gathering up the hammer and a fistful of nails I laid a plank across the door and started work. Getting the nails through the wood and into the masonry was even harder than I'd expected, but in a couple of minutes it was in place, and felt very solid. I heaved another plank into place and set about securing it. This was actually going to work.

After half an hour I was into the swing of it and the wood now reached almost halfway up the doorframe. My arms aching and head ringing from the hammering, which was very loud in the confined space of the back hall, I had a cigarette leaning on the completed section, staring blankly out onto the drive. I was jolted back from reverie by the realisation that a piece of dust or something must have landed on my eye, slightly distorting my vision, and I blinked to remove it. But it didn't go. It didn't hurt, just made a small patch of the drive up near the road look a bit ruffled. I rubbed and shut both eyes individually and discovered with mounting unease that the distortion was present in both.

I stood upright. Something was definitely going on at the top of the drive. The patch still looked ruffled, as if seen through a heat haze, and whichever way I turned my head it stayed in the same place. It was flickering very slightly now too, like a bad quality film print. But the flecks weren't white, they were dark. I rubbed my eyes hard again, but once I'd stopped seeing stars I saw that the effect was still there, and I stared hard at it, trying to discern something that I could interpret. The flecks seemed to organise into broken and shifting vertical lines as I watched, as if something were hidden behind a curtain of rain, rain so coloured as to make up a picture of that patch of the drive. This impression gradually strengthened until it was like looking at one of those plastic strip 'doors', where you walk through the hanging strips. It was as if there was one of those at the top of the drive with a patch of driveway pictured on it in living three dimensions, with something moving just the other side of it.

Then suddenly the balance shifted, like one of those drawings made up of black and white dots where if you stare at it long enough you can see a Dalmatian. I dropped to my knees behind the partially completed barrier. Fear was no longer a word I had any use for. They were back.

Standing at the top of the drive, their images somehow both underlying and superimposed on it as if the two were

woven together, were the man in the suit and the blond man. They were standing in a frozen and unnatural position, like a freeze-frame in a very old home movie, their faces pallid and washed out, the colouring uneven, the image flickering and dancing in front of my eyes. And still they stood, not there, and yet in some sense there.

As I stared, transfixed, I noticed that the suited man's foot appeared to be moving. It was hard to focus on, and happening bizarrely slowly, but it was moving, gradually leaving the ground. Then, as over the course of several minutes it was raised and then lowered back onto the ground a couple of feet in front of its original position, leaving the man's body leaning slightly forward, I realised what I was seeing. In extraordinary and flickering slow motion, somehow projected onto the drive, the suited man was beginning to walk down towards the house. Except that the image wasn't flickering so much any more, the colours were stronger, and I could no longer see the driveway through them. Somehow they were coming back through. I thought I'd got away with it, but I hadn't. I'd fallen out. Not very far by anyone's standards, but far enough. Far enough to have come back in through the wrong door. And now they were tearing their way back into the world, or hauling me back towards theirs. And very very slowly they were getting closer.

Fighting to stay calm I grabbed a plank, put it into position above the others and nailed it into place. Then another, and another, not pausing for breath or thought. Through the narrowing gap I could see them getting closer and they didn't look anything like two-dimensional photographs any longer and they were moving quicker now too. Then as I leaned towards the kitchen for a plank I saw that there was a single dusty carton on the floor. It had started.

I smacked another plank into place and hammered it down. The suited man and the blond man were now real again, and they were also much closer, though still moving at a weirdly graceful tenth of normal speed. Hammering wildly now, ignoring increasingly frequent whacks on the fingers, I cast occasional monitoring glances aside into the kitchen. The fridge was beginning to look a bit strange, the stark nineties geometry softening, regressing, and the rubbish was gathering. I never saw any of it arrive, but each time I looked there was another piece of cardboard, a few more scraps, one more layer of grime. It had barely started, and was still happening very slowly, maybe because I'd barely fallen out, but it was happening. The house was going over.

And I kept right on hammering. Obviously what I had to do at some point was run to the front door, go out and come back in again, come in through the right door. But that could wait, would have to wait. It was all developing very slowly this time and I still felt completely clear-headed. What I had to do first was seal off the back door, and soon. The two men, always at the vanguard of the change, were well and truly here and getting closer all the time. I had to make sure that the back door was secure against anything those two could do to it for long enough for me to get to the front door. I had no idea what the front hall would be like by the time I got there and if I left the back door unfinished and got caught up in the front hall trying to get to the door I'd be in real trouble.

So I slammed planks into place as fast as I could. Outside they got steadily closer and inside another carton appeared in the kitchen. As I jammed the last horizontal board into place the suited man and the blond man were only a couple of yards away, now moving at full pace, and I'd barely nailed it in before the first blow crashed into it, bending it and making me leap back with shock. I hurriedly picked up more wood and started to place planks over the barrier in vertical slats and crosses, nailing them in hard, reinforcing and making sure that they were securely fastened to the wall on all sides, furiously hammering and building. After a while I couldn't feel the ache in my back or see the blood on my hands: all I could hear was the beating of the hammer, and all I could see were the heads of the nails as I piled more and more wood onto the barrier. I had wood to spare – I hadn't even needed that last bloody plank – and by the time I finished it was four planks thick in some places, and the reinforcing strips spread several feet either side of the frame. I used the last three pieces as bracing struts, forcing them horizontally across the hallway, one end of each lodged in niches in the barrier, the other jammed tight against the opposite wall.

Finally it was finished and I stood back and looked at it. It looked pretty damn solid.

"Let's see you get through that then, you bastards," I said quietly, half sitting and half collapsing to the ground.

After a moment I noticed how quiet it was. At some point they must have stopped banging against the door. How long ago I had no idea. I'd been making far too much noise to notice, and my ears were still ringing. I put my ear against the barrier and listened. Silence. I lit a cigarette and let tiredness and a blessed feeling of safeness wash over me. The sound of the match striking was slightly muted, but that could have been the ringing in my ears as much as anything and the kitchen looked pretty grubby but no more than that. And I felt fine.

Vaguely wondering what the two outside were up to, whether there was any chance that they might, not realising that I understood about the right door and the wrong door, have given up and be waiting for the change to take its course, I sat and finished my cigarette, actually savouring the feeling of being balanced between two worlds, secure in the knowledge that in a moment I would just walk out that front door and the house would come back and none of it would matter a damn.

Eventually I stood up. I was really going to ache tomorrow, I thought as I stepped into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding a large black spider that scuttled out of one of the cartons. The floor was getting very messy now, with scraps of dried-up rotted meat covered with the corpses of dead maggots and small piles of stuff I really didn't want to look at too closely. Skirting the rubbish I walked over to the door past the now bizarrely misshapen fridge and into the front hall.

The hallway was still clear, and as far as I could see, utterly normal. As I crossed it towards the front door, anxious now to get the whole thing over with, and wondering how I was going to explain the state of the back door to my family, I noticed a very faint tapping sound in the far distance. After a moment it stopped and then restarted from a slightly different direction. Odd, but scarcely a primary concern. Right now my priority was getting out of that front door before the hall got any stranger.

Feeling like an actor about to bound onto stage, and looking forward very much to looking out onto the real world, I reached out to the doorknob, twisted it and pulled it towards me, smiling.

At first I couldn't take it in. I couldn't understand why instead of the driveway all I could see was brown. Brown flatness. Then as I adjusted my focal length, pulling it in for something much closer than the drive I'd been expecting, I began to realise, because the view looked rather familiar. I'd seen something like it very recently.

It was a barrier. An impregnable wooden barrier nailed across the door into the walls from the outside. Now I knew what they'd been doing as I finished nailing them out. They'd been nailing me in.

I tried everything I could think of against that barrier, my fists, my shoulder, a chair. It was there to stay. I couldn't get out. I couldn't come back in through the right door and for the moment they couldn't get in through the wrong door. A sort of stalemate. But a very poor sort for me, because they were much the stronger and getting more so all the time, because the house was still going over and now I couldn't stop it.

I walked into the kitchen, rubbing my bruised shoulder and thinking furiously. There had to be something I could do, and I had to do it fast. The change was speeding up. Although the hall still looked normal the kitchen was now filthy, and the fifties fridge was back. In the background I could still hear the faint tapping noise. Maybe they were trying to get in through the roof.

I had to get out, had to find a way. Come on, lateral thinking. You leave a house by a door. How else? No other way. You always leave by a door. But is there any other way you *could* leave? The doors ... Christ. The windows. What about the windows? If there was a right door and a wrong door, maybe there were right and wrong windows too, and maybe the right ones looked out onto the real world. Maybe, just maybe, you could smash one and then climb out and then back in again. Maybe that would work.

I had no idea whether it would or not. I wasn't kidding myself that I understood anything, and God alone knew where I might land if I chose the wrong window. Perhaps I'd go out the wrong one and then be chased round the house by the two maniacs outside as I tried to find a right window to break back in through. That would be a barrel of laughs, wouldn't it? That would be just Fun City. But what choice did I have? Through the square window today, children, I thought crazily, and ran into the living room, heading for the big picture window.

I don't know how I could not have made the connection. Maybe because the taps were so quiet. I just stood in the living room, my mouth open. This time they were one jump ahead. They'd boarded up the bloody windows.

I ran into the hall, the dining room, upstairs to the bedrooms. Every single window was boarded up. I knew where they'd got the nails from, I'd spilt more than enough when I fell, but how ... Then I realised how they'd nailed them in without a hammer, why the tapping had been so quiet. With sudden sickening clarity I found I could imagine the suited man clubbing the nails in with his fists, smashing them in with his forehead and grinning while he did it. Oh Jesus.

I walked downstairs again. Every single window. Even the ones that were too small to climb through. Then as I stood in the kitchen amidst the growing piles, the pounding on the back door started. There was no way I could get out of the house. I couldn't stop it. This time it was going over all the way and taking me with it. And they were going to smash their way in to come along for the ride. To get me. I listened, watching the rubbish, as the pounding got louder and louder.

It's still getting louder, and I can tell from the sound that some of the planks are beginning to give way. The house stopped balancing long ago, and the change is coming on more quickly. The kitchen looks like a bomb site and there are an awful lot of spiders in there now. Eventually I left them to it and came through the hall into here, only making one or two wrong turnings. Into the living room.

And that's where I am now, just sitting and waiting. There is nothing I can do about the change, nothing. I can't get out. I can't stop them getting in.

But there is one thing I can do. I'm going to stay here, in the living room. I can see small shadows now, gathering in corners and darting out from under the chairs, and it's quite dark down by the end wall. The wall itself seems less important now, less substantial, less of a barrier. And I think I can hear the sound of running water somewhere far away, and smell the faintest hint of dark and lush vegetation.

I won't let them get me. I'll wait, in the gathering darkness here in the living room, listening to the coming of the night sounds, feeling a soft breeze on my face and sensing the room opening out as the walls shade away, as I sit here quietly in the dark warm air. And then I'll get up and start walking, walking out into the dark land, into the jungle and amidst the trees that stand all around behind the darkness, smelling the greenness that surrounds me and hearing the gentle river off somewhere to the right. And I'll feel happy walking away into the night, and maybe far away I'll meet whatever makes the growling sounds I begin to hear in the distance and we'll sit together by running water and be at peace in the darkness.