To reach the stairs from my apartment, it is necessary to pass three doors: apartments number 622, 623, and 624. Those numbers are brass, nailed to each door at eye level. The doors themselves are a musty pink. They are old-fashioned—solid wood with five thin, rectangular recessed panels set at intervals top to bottom. This is important.

On the morning of January fourth, there were huge noises in that hall, thumping noises like heavy things dropping onto something hollow, and I woke up from a dream of a house fire to realize that I heard breaking wood and the indistinct voices of men. It was four-thirty, still very early, and very dark. The sun wouldn’t be up for almost four hours.

Opposite my bed there is a wall that faces the big windows of the living room and the street. A steady pattern of light flashed on that wall; red, white, and yellow. No police, then. Police would add blue to the mix.

Naked from bed, I walked into the living room and watched the lights flash on my arms and stomach. Behind me I could hear my husband turn over in his sleep and there seemed no good reason to wake him. Outside in the street it was very quiet. There were a fire truck and an ambulance there, twirling their lights, no one inside either of them. There was no sign of any hurry or distress. The windows in the apartment buildings across the street were all dark. A man set on some very early errand walked past the trucks, walked up the street, and then around the corner at the gas station. Once he was gone, there was no one else in the entire world awake with me—it seemed like that. But there must have been someone.

In the hall were more thumps, sounds I didn’t know, and more voices that I heard better when I stood near the door. There could have been two voices. There might have been three.

“Still warm.” Then: “Start CPR.” That was that, it explained everything: all at once someone had died, or was dying, or might die.

There is a peephole in my door, as there are in all the doors in the building. From my peephole I can see the doors of apartments 622, 623, and
If I looked through my peephole I would know who was still warm, but I did not look.

I didn’t think that I should not look through the peephole—I had forgotten about the peephole. I didn’t think that I must not open the door to see because I had no clothes on—I thought that the door must stay shut because outside in the hall there were things that were inappropriate to see. Not ugly, or disgusting, though emergencies are often both, but private. It was a personal matter, whether this person would continue to be warm or would gradually become less so, and I felt that I ought to have no part in it. It was too important to see.

I was afraid too, of course. It was a death, or a near-death, and no matter what sort of thinking one has done about it, death is not an easy thing to feel brush past you while you are naked, in the dark.

I thought this sort of thought for some time as I listened through the door to what went on out in the hall. The whole affair took on the sense of a radio drama, or what I imagine listening to a radio drama felt like—sound only, with hisses and voices that faded, sometimes, so that I couldn’t hear them at all. There were more thumps. They were softer than the ones previous. There were also creaks, metallic sounds, sounds that could have been fabric stretching or tearing, more sounds that didn’t sound like anything else I knew.

I wondered if the other neighbors were doing the same thing I was. Pressed against my door, I imagined the entire hallway, the entire building, in identical positions: everyone listening the same as me, everyone reverent and attentive to the same moment. I never heard a door open, never heard any new voices. As seemed right and proper, the event took its course in a perfect and majestic solitude in the hall outside my apartment.

It got quiet, eventually. I climbed back into bed next to my husband, fell asleep, and dreamed of a man who avoids his death by becoming a cloud of spores and implanting himself into strangers.

Though I was well familiar with their doors, I didn’t know any of my neighbors in more than a passing way. In 622 lived a family with two teenaged children. I had heard the man’s loud voice from the room often, scolding someone in Chinese, and more softly in the hall when he might say “Hello” as we walked past each other. I had never heard the voice of anyone else in the family.
I had seen the inside of 623 the summer before, but not its resident—two hired men with a flatbed truck were demolishing the solid mass of newspapers and shoeboxes inside. The mass was eight feet high, with narrow paths to the television, kitchen, and bathroom. It was the first time I had seen anyone go in or out. I strung a hair across the doorframe with a dab of spit, once, to see if the door ever opened. A week went by. Eventually the hair fell off and draped over the doorknob. I stopped paying attention to the place.

624 could have been vacant, or not. I’d never seen or heard anyone there. Any of the apartments, after that night, could have been vacant or not. I woke up and went about the business of dressing myself and having breakfast in an uncomfortable place of infinite possibility, where it felt as though anyone—everyone—could have ceased to be warm in the night.

Then my cat came awake and whined for the milk in my bowl and my husband started a shower, and the feeling faded somewhat. It was very pleasant to hear the water run and to pull my cat’s tail. Even putting on my shoes, this was pleasant too—it was the last thing to do before going out into a world of people who were all alive, who had not died in the night while I listened at my door. And so I went out into the hallway that morning.

No one had come to clean up yet. On the floor, in the middle of the hall, there were triangles of adhesive backing from the butterfly-shaped bandages that hold IV needles to skin. There was a whole constellation of little blue tubes, perhaps half an inch long with rounded ends. Covers for the needles. Two strips of white medical tape stuck to the wall, which was the outer wall of my bedroom, three feet up from the floor. There was a puddle of something thick and brownish on the purple carpet, congealed like old beans.

One of the recessed panels in the pink door of apartment 624 had been smashed out. A slice of plywood was screwed over the hole, but it was still possible to see just a bit inside and to see that the resident owned—or had owned—a red fake-Persian carpet and that the apartment had been very clean. The loudest thumps and the broken wood of the night before made sense now—someone had needed to break a hole in the door of apartment 624 to reach in and unlock the door in order to find its resident, who had been warm and who might still be, or might not.

The puddle in the hall was important. If it was vomit, the resident had likely lived—CPR pushes air into the stomach, which often causes vomiting.
when the body begins to work again. If the puddle was feces, the bowels of the resident had relaxed their grip on whatever half-digested thing was still in them. That meant the resident had almost certainly died.

I walked closer, crouching to get its scent: no odor, really. It looked a great deal like my cat’s vomit, a uniformly colored thick paste with small lumps throughout. I wondered if perhaps the resident had been eating cat food.

Somehow it did not seem inappropriate to scrutinize my neighbor’s waste. It was startlingly intimate: I can count on one hand the number of people whose vomit or feces I have paid so much attention to. Certainly the resident’s vomit or feces were the only ones in the world that I had ever paused to smell. What of it? There was no grandeur in the hall on that morning. What was important had come and gone. The death that could have been anyone in the night, could have been everyone, narrowed in the hall that morning to a brown puddle. The feeling of infinite possibility and infinite dread faded further, and I went outside.

He died, as it happened. Two days later, paying my rent, I asked the manager about it and he explained it all: the resident, feeling ill, had in a moment of confusion called the emergency number for maintenance instead of the hospital. It was the handyman who had called the fire truck and ambulance. By the time they arrived, the resident was beyond saving. And that was that.

I look at the door of the apartment where he died almost every day, because it is between my apartment and either of the two doors out of the building. It took weeks for the broken door to be replaced, and what replaced it was a flat wood one, unpainted, with no recessed panels. It would be hard to break. Several days ago a cross appeared on it. Someone smeared it on with oil. It’s still there, since oil does not evaporate, two darker and faintly glossy lines on the beige wood.

After walking past the door and its oily cross, I started to wonder what sort of oil had been used. I hadn’t seen it made, there was no one to ask; somehow it seemed important to know whether the cross had been made in an official capacity or not, with oil from a church or a kitchen. On my way out, the next morning, I put my nose to the resident’s door where the wood was darker with oil and sniffed. It would be olives for a lay blessing, balsam for a church.

There was no scent. Even with my nose touching the wood’s surface there was no scent. Again the resident had told me nothing—a door between me and him, and all the questions I could think to ask.