

Episode 31: Doorkeeper

Leslie

She stood under Gothic arches in a cathedral's apse. Paintings showed nothing church-like but instead scenes of legality, robed men in courtrooms with wagging fingers and jaws, a secular apse with no connecting nave—no space for a congregation—because facing away from the altar, instead of pews, Leslie met with a wall, and in that wall, a door.

It wasn't a spectacular door. It seemed out of place at the bottom of the grand carpeted stairway leading down from the magnificent altar, the altar embellished with gold tassels and lace, mounted with a gavel instead of a typical holy symbol. The apse had a message. The door didn't, at least none Leslie discerned.

She wore a beige skirt suit and a burgundy blouse, not an outfit for church but for court. It felt odd because she didn't remember putting it on. Also odd was the person with her on the altar steps.

The boy couldn't have been as old as eighteen. He wore a black T-shirt and black jeans but didn't seem at all uncomfortable sitting on the lush stairway, reading a book. The book jacket, which looked vintage, said it was *The Trial* by Franz Kafka.

"I gave this book to my girlfriend, Annie," the boy said, not looking up. "It's one of my favorites, and it's an old copy, so I thought it might be valuable."

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I don't know why I have it now. Annie's dead, I guess."

Leslie thought she should say something. She couldn't think of anything.

"Here," the boy said. "Let me read my favorite part to you. Just the things I underlined." He looked up from the book, as if to confirm he had her attention, then read:

"In front of the law there is a doorkeeper. A man from the countryside comes up to the door and asks for entry. But the doorkeeper says he can't let him in to the law right now. The man thinks about this, and then he asks if he'll be able to go in later on. 'That's possible,' says the doorkeeper, 'but not now.' ...The man from the country had not expected difficulties like this, the law was supposed to be accessible for anyone at any time, he thinks, but now he looks more closely at the doorkeeper... and he decides it's better to wait until he has permission to enter. ...Over many years, the man watches the doorkeeper almost without a break. ...Just before he dies, he brings together all his experience from all this time into one question which he has still never put to the doorkeeper. ... 'Everyone wants access to the law,' says the man, 'how come, over all these years, no-one but me has asked to be let in?' The doorkeeper can see the man's come to his end, his hearing has faded, and so, so that he can be heard, he shouts to him: 'Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I'll go and close it.'"

The boy looked at Leslie again and smiled. "Pretty devastating, isn't it? By the way, my name's Max. Oh, and you might want to know, I'm dead, too."

"Okay," she said. "Nice to meet you, Max." She considered interpreting what was happening as a dream, but she didn't think it was. Attached to her perception of the truncated apse was an impression that logic had betrayed her, that life had become oneiric but involved no sleep, that the unreal had become real in a way she could never reverse. The impression came from a place called The Middle Reaches.

"Nice to meet you, too, Leslie," Max said.

And why *wouldn't* Kafka-quoting Max already know her name? It followed. Middle Reaches Logic. She looked at her surroundings again, and Middle Reaches Logic made connections for her. "The door," she said. "The unspectacular door, opposite the altar. That's my door. To access the Law.

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And you, Max—are you my doorkeeper?”

“Who, me?” Max closed the book and stood up. “Do I look like the doorkeeper type? Heck, I’ll open the door for you, if you want. Your situation is a little different from the man from the countryside’s.” Max had a buoyancy that clashed with being a teenager who wears all black and reads Kafka. “You... uh... *do* know your situation?”

Her situation? She decided to be honest. “I haven’t a clue.”

“Okay, um.” He huffed. “I told you *I’m* dead, and you took that in stride, so maybe... don’t freak out, okay? You’re dead, too.”

Upon reflection, being dead made sense. Sheldon, or the thing Sheldon had turned into, had killed her after she’d left Nick to his fate.

“Okay,” she said. She pondered, but only for a moment. “I’m going to go through my door.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Max said.

Leslie descended a few steps, studying the unspectacular door, then stopped and looked at Max. “I can do this,” she said, “because I’m dead.”

“You know what they say,” Max said, nodding, smiling. “Death has its privileges.”

“They don’t say that,” Leslie said. *Death’s not an escape*. She remembered herself saying that.

“Maybe I’m here to remind you,” Max said, walking toward her. “Law and death share the same absurdity. You have to get out, to get in.”

She remembered saying something like that, too. “Thank you, Max,” she said. They were face to face.

“Here,” he said, handing her the copy of *The Trial*. “I think you’re supposed to have it.”

“Thanks... again,” Leslie said. She tucked the book into her purse—it didn’t entirely fit—and stepped away from Max. The doorknob turned easily. She stepped through her doorway.

Heather

“BREAK ME!”

The High King heard. He accepted her invitation.

And she would accept his. Even if they had to fumble forward in the dark. Heather followed Bobby’s noise. One of his hands used the rapier, newly his, like a blind man’s white cane, tapping on the passage’s stone floor, while his other hand glided along the nearest stone wall. “Bobby,” she whispered, “can you see anything at all?”

“Maybe,” the young man said. Thinking of him as a boy didn’t feel right anymore. He was a young man.

A question that had repeated in her mind since they’d left the Citadel reasserted itself: *What’s more terrifying, Bobby, hope or despair?* She asked, “What do you mean, maybe?”

Darkness made her lucid.

“When we first lost track of the light from the room beneath the Audience Chamber,” Bobby said, “it was like somebody dipped my head in black ink. Nothing at all. For a little while, though, my eyes might have been playing tricks. It’s been less like ink, more like a blindfold, and a point of light was barely getting through. And then it was like three points of light, flickering, there one second, gone the next.”

Heather strained to see the three points of light but saw nothing. However, she knew better than to doubt Bobby. He was... dignified... by rare talent. So, she supposed, was she, but he was unbroken. He didn’t know to fear hope and embrace despair.

He did have good vision, though. Before long, Heather’s nothing turned into three spots of light, and those three spots turned into nine. Flames on nine candles separated onto three floor candelabras, one candelabra central and taller than the other two, each with one candlestick central and taller than the other two. They all flickered up ahead.

Soon, they could see—dimly. Bobby stopped tapping his sword but didn’t sheath it.

They approached a wide doorway with a rounded arch. The door seemed to

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be made from the same stone as the rest of the passage. It had a carving on it that Heather couldn't see well. She made out a shape, if not human than humanoid, and guessed the other shapes around it were the same. Hundreds, if not thousands, of them carried giant shards up a hill where, at the top, they were building something.

In front of the door stood a naked man. His physique did not appear impaired, but he hunched so far over that he almost seemed to bow. His left hand held the tallest, central candelabra. The fingers wrapped around the support pole ended with long, pointed black nails, a sharp contrast to his yellow skin. Heather mused that her complexion was supposed to have something to do with yellow, but this man was *yellow*, mustard yellow, *ballpark* mustard yellow, not a more muted, gourmet Dijon.

Heather laughed. Bobby looked at her with a concerned expression. The yellow man looked from her to Bobby and back again. He opened his mouth as if about to speak. A forked tongue sprung out, lapped at stagnant air, and retracted. He smiled. Heather laughed again. She liked the yellow man. One of hers.

"This passage, I think, I think," the yellow man said, uttering each word as if it cost the last of his breath, "is not for you." He had tufts of black hair on his chest, under his arms, and between his legs. The stringy black hair on his head dangled over parts of his face. Partially occluded, his bulging eyes had big black centers. "I think—I think—you would not have business with a god's doorway to the Walled City."

"But we do," Bobby said. "Please let us pass." He didn't point the sword at the yellow man, but he held it in a way that punctuated his request.

Heather laughed again, but she felt uncomfortable. She had a duty to go forward—to follow the path, the call, the yearning of the one who had set her free—but did she not also have a duty to her own? To *theirs*?

Or was the yellow man a plaything, hers to kill? Her laughter made Bobby look nervous. She couldn't help laughing at *that*.

Becky

For months, every night had brought the same dream. It was like a video call. A tall, attractive man with a big build sat on a chair in front of her, elbow on a table, chin resting on his hand. He wore blue jeans and a red shirt and seemed to have friendly eyes even though he didn't smile. He filled her field of vision, the entire frame of the call except for the small window that showed her herself.

Her dark blonde hair, which barely touched her shoulders, looked like a rat's nest. She wore the oversized Wonder Woman T-shirt she preferred to sleep in, but she looked like she hadn't slept in ages. She looked closer to fifty-two than thirty-two. She was pathetic.

"Rebecca Charles, *now* is the time to leave," the dream man said. "Take Charlotte Charlotte, get in the car, and go. I can't take care of you there. You know where I'm waiting for you."

"Where," Becky repeated. "The Middle Reaches." She knew where the man wanted her to go. The main road through her neighborhood, Fairview, ran into a road called Acton Way, which dead-ended in a woody area with a creek. Another road, another Acton Way, dead-ended into the same area on the other side. If she followed the creek—Sweetwater Creek—she'd wind up in the place the man meant.

The Middle Reaches. She didn't like the sound of it—her intuition cringed—but the man in the red shirt would keep her safe in The Middle Reaches. Safe from George. Safe from the deepening hell that was her marriage. The man's voice repeated in her head when she was awake: *I'm waiting for you, waiting for you, waiting for you.*

She flipped the pork chops she was frying on the stovetop. The potatoes were mostly mashed—maybe a little more milk and butter—and she was about ready to turn the heat up and finish steaming the vegetables. George waited at the kitchen table, plate, knife, and fork already set, drinking his third glass of wine and reading news on his tablet.

Charlotte Charlotte sat on the sofa in the adjoining living room watching television, something zany on the cartoon channel. She was eight. Becky

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didn't know how miserable life with her fucked-up parents made her feel. The girl talked more to her stuffed rabbit, JJ, than she did to her mother.

"Hey," George said without looking up from his tablet. "Did you finish the laundry?"

"Yes," Becky said, adding half a stick of butter to the potatoes. Other than meeting CC at the bus stop, the laundry had been her first task when she'd gotten home from her part-time job at Waste Disposal Solutions. She kept her answer short, though. George was in a foul mood.

"Did you iron my favorite shirt?" he asked.

Shit. If she lied, he'd check. "I was going to do it first thing after dinner." *I'm waiting for you, waiting for you, waiting for you.*

George left the table, came to where she stood at the stove. He held the steak knife, intended for the pork chops, in his left hand. His right hand was empty. He slapped her with his right hand. "You mean you forgot," he said. "You know I need that shirt for my presentation tomorrow."

Waiting—

"I'm sorry, I—"

He switched the knife into his right hand, balled his left into a fist, and punched her in the stomach. She bent over, not sure if she would cough or puke.

"Don't be so forgetful," he said. He turned around and headed back to the table as she caught her breath and struggled to stand upright. Sometimes, when he hit her, he was in a rage. Sometimes, like this one, he was perfectly calm. Doling out lessons. Doling out his idea of justice.

Waiting.

What if the dream man was *only* a dream? What if The Middle Reaches was only trees, water, and mud? She was crazy to think—

On the stovetop, the pork chops sizzled in the skillet. She'd never tried to hit back. Not in ten years.

Waiting.

He still had the knife in his right hand.

She lifted the skillet, tested its weight. The second she felt certain that she could swing it with enough force, she did. It slammed into the side of George's

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head. For an instant, Becky heard the hiss of the metal burning his face. He stumbled, dropped to one knee, grabbed at the table for balance, and keeled over with a guttural scream.

Becky dropped the skillet and pork chops on the floor and ran for the living room. “Charlotte Charlotte! Get up! We’re going out!” Becky beelined for where her daughter sat on the sofa.

“Is Daddy—”

Becky grabbed CC’s arm, careful not to yank her shoulder out of its socket but with enough strength to pull her to her feet. “Daddy’s staying here. We’ve got to hurry! Come on!”

Charlotte Charlotte could hardly keep up as Becky led her to the front door. “WAIT!” the girl yelled. “JJ!”

Becky looked back at the sofa, where the stuffed rabbit, half the size of the little girl, sat upright as if he were watching television. Except for the pink on his floppy ears, oversized paws, and bulging belly, the blue in his plastic eyes, and the black that outlined the human-looking teeth in his broad grin, he was white. CC would fight her if she tried to leave him behind.

Never letting go of her daughter’s hand, she went back for the revered toy pet. As she grabbed it, she heard George yell, “FUCKING BITCH!”

While her shaking hands tried to undo the front door’s bolt and chain, she looked over her shoulder and saw George in the kitchen doorway, knife in hand. He repeated, “Fucking bitch.”

The door opened, and with JJ in one hand and CC in the other, she raced for the car. Her stomach nearly exploded when she thought she might have left the keys behind, but thankfully, she’d shoved them in her pocket instead of her purse when she’d gotten home. She had nothing else. No money. No plans. Just... a... dream.

Waiting.

She practically tossed Charlotte Charlotte and JJ into the backseat before jumping into the front, locking the doors, and jamming the key into the ignition. George appeared in the front doorway she’d left open. He grabbed the doorframe with both hands—one still holding the knife—and screamed, “GET BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!”

She put the car in reverse, picked up speed going down their street, and left tracks turning sharply onto Fairview. She couldn't see George in any of her mirrors. In minutes, she and her daughter would be at the dead end of Acton way. They'd see how crazy Becky actually was.

Ellie

Ellie and Adam Mortimer abandoned their house at the dead end of one of the Acton Ways when the police came, which they'd known would happen sooner or later. Gordon was young and didn't have the temperament for the care they took with murder. Hell, she'd met him violating NIMBY—Not in My Back Yard—trying to cover up the murder of Bobby Lightfoot, so the fact that he'd killed Max Gracey in the Mortimers' house and the Ledbetter kids in his own held no surprise.

Adam told her not to pack; he had a “retreat.” Ellie had been to the place between the Acton Ways, but she had never followed the creek, and she wasn't prepared for The Middle Reaches when Adam introduced her. She was even less prepared for Adam to disappear.

She was least prepared for the babbling creek, moving vines, twisted trees, and discolored sky to vanish and to find herself standing in front of a skyscraper downtown, wearing an unfamiliar dress, holding a slim briefcase. She went inside.

In the mind-boggling lobby, a Chinese man met her and guided her to the forty-ninth floor, the offices of Beaufort and Associates, Attorneys at Law, where she had an interview with Angelica Beaufort herself.

The Chinese man warned that few gained access to the office of Angelica Beaufort, Founder and Managing Partner of the firm that was not famous but was nevertheless one of the most... influential... in the country, possibly the world. He showed Ellie in but stopped at the threshold and closed the door behind her.

The great woman—she radiated greatness—stood from her stately desk and approached Ellie with an outstretched hand, which Ellie shook, hiding

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her bewilderment. “Please, call me Angelica,” she said. “And may I call you Ellie?”

“Ellie, for Eleanor,” Ellie said. “Yes.”

“Let’s sit down, shall we?” She gestured to adjacent chairs at the oblong conference table where two bottles of water and glasses of ice already waited. They sat. Neither touched a water bottle.

Angelica asked to look at her résumé. Ellie opened her slim briefcase and found a stack of résumés that she’d never written. She handed one to Angelica, and while Angelica perused, she looked at one herself.

The document highlighted her organizational skills, her creativity, and, foremost, her discretion. Under experience, it listed her accomplishments in the business she’d run with Adam, matching collectors with antiques and other hard-to-find items throughout the Southeast. Beneath those accomplishments, it bullet-pointed murders with information about victims. She recognized some of the names.

Ellie remained calm, and Angelica was delightful. The interview maintained an atmosphere of normalcy, but instead of asking questions about Ellie’s employment history or fit for an office job (which Ellie soon learned was to be Angelica’s Personal Assistant), Angelica asked a great deal about Ellie’s ability to respond to violence and the unknown. How well might she work under otherworldly pressures?

Quite well, thank you.

“Do you,” Angelica asked, “have apprehensions about monsters?”

Ellie thought of an honest, yet perfect, answer: “I *am* a monster.”

She got the job. Most days and nights—she never seemed to leave, never seemed to sleep— she sat at the desk outside Angelica’s door telling people they couldn’t go in. Today, however, was different. Something had happened *over there*, and a new arrival was coming. Ellie had no idea how long she’d worked for Angelica, but in all that time, only she and Angelica had entered Angelica’s office.

Ellie had instructions to allow Leslie Jarndyce to enter, and when she did, everything would change.

Leslie

The unspectacular door opened away from the cathedral's legalistic apse, and as Leslie crossed the threshold, moving forward into an unknown, she sensed the change: the unspectacular door gained a spectacular nameplate. Dark lettering on shiny brass announced, "Angelica Beaufort, Esq."

Leslie knew the name, of course, because Beaufort and Associates was her firm, but at least in Atlanta, the associates, the junior partners, and most of the senior partners worked in one building while Ms. Beaufort and others of the highest rank worked in the same tower as Mansworth Futures and Securities, MFS, their biggest client and the reason Leslie had moved back to the Atlanta suburbs in the first place.

Leslie had never met anyone who had met Angelica Beaufort. People speculated about the powerful woman's appearance and age. Even though she knew nothing about her, Leslie felt glad she worked for a firm helmed by a woman.

Now, she was walking into that woman's office suite. Death has its privileges?

Leslie observed the soft blue carpet and the cheerful yellow wallpaper. To her right, the wall was solid window, a breathtaking view of the city that meant they were on a high floor. To her left, a walled-off square was probably the office within the office, where Ms. Beaufort likely worked. Its door was reddish, probably cherry, matching the bookshelves, filing cabinets, and the desk in the exterior not far from it.

A mid-thirties-ish white woman with brown hair sat at the modest desk, but when the door with the nameplate closed behind Leslie, she stood. She didn't mask her sigh; she didn't make her smile look genuine. "Leslie Jarndyce?" she asked.

Like Max, the woman already knew her name. Naturally. Unmoored, Leslie nodded.

Circumventing the desk, the woman approached with an extended hand. "I'm Ellie Mortimer, Angelica's Personal Assistant."

They shook. Leslie awaited more information while considering that Ellie

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used the first name, *Angelica*.

“We’ll get to know each other better,” Ellie said, “but first, this way.” Ellie led Leslie to the inner office’s entrance, opened the reddish door, and gestured for Leslie to go inside.

Leslie said, “Thank you.”

Inside, the woman standing in front of a grand desk surprised her. Leslie had aimed to be the first black woman to make partner at Beaufort, but Angelica—she had an aura of command and must have been Angelica—was black. She wore her hair in long skinny braids that reached halfway down her back. High cheekbones and full lips defined her pretty face, but a suit, a man’s black suit with broad shoulders and straight legs, obscured her body. Her white shirt had a button-down collar; her tie was gold.

“Leslie, I’m Angelica, and it’s a pleasure to meet you, but I only have a minute, and you have a lot of work to do,” the powerful woman said. “I’m tapping you to take second chair on the MFS case. The position requires more diplomacy than litigation. You will often be my representative.”

Impossible! A hundred other lawyers would be in line ahead of her for that position. She wasn’t qualified—

“The last person in the position has been hospitalized, I think permanently,” Angelica said. “You are the best qualified to take his place.”

“Why...”

“You’ve been through The Middle Reaches,” Angelica said. “You know of Carcosa, the God of the Palace, the God of the Citadel, and the God of the Lake. Follow me, please.”

Angelica exited, and Leslie followed her back through the reddish door. They passed Ellie and went to the back of the office, where Angelica put her hand into a bookcase and pulled a book forward. A side of the bookcase came forward at an angle, opening like a door.

Beyond lay a spiral staircase going down into a space that seemed without end, a space lined with books, books, and books.

“Research, Leslie. Learn as much as you can about the topics you’ve touched, Carcosa, the gods, Lake Hali. Especially Lake Hali.” Angelica looked at her. Leslie tried to meet her gaze with confidence. “Will you do that, Leslie? Will

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you join me?"

Leslie was dumbfounded. She said yes. Naturally.