

## **The Door I Keep Open**

By Irena Kagansky

The door to my study never locked. It didn't need to. For ten years it had been a threshold I crossed without thinking, crutches clicking on hardwood, my son's crayon drawings taped to the frame like permission slips.

I stood in the hallway of our Burlington house, forearm crutches humming against my ribs like a second skeleton I never asked for but learned to sing with. Inside, the desk waited. The laptop glowed. The page was a white desert, with no horizon.

My son, Phoenix, was twelve now. Old enough to notice. He called out "Mom!" at 7:30 a.m., the same time he always has, with a freshly brewed cup of coffee already waiting for me on the dining room table.

"Mom? Are you coming?"

I heard the question under the question: "Are you okay?"

"Yes, sweetheart," I said. The words came out wrong, flat.

He paused. "Okay. I'll leave the balcony door open in case you want to get some air"

That's what people did for me. Left doors open. My husband, Daniel, left the kitchen door open so I could hear if Phoenix came home from school. The physiotherapist left the exercise door open: "You can modify this." My editor left the manuscript door open: "Take the time you need."

I hated it. Doors open meant I was expected to walk through them. And I couldn't.

I sank to the floor where I always sank when the spasticity in my right leg turned it to stone. The crutches clattered beside me. The hallway smelled like coffee and old rain.

The song. That was it. The song of getting up, of making breakfast one-handed while Phoenix told me about Minecraft, of writing 500 words before noon even if they were terrible. The song was gone, and doubt had a voice again.

Duty got me out of bed. Duty got Phoenix to school. Duty answered Daniel's texts: "Home at 6. Love you". But duty didn't write. Duty didn't mother without resenting the silence. Duty was a grave, and I was standing in it, crutches as headstones.

The challenge wasn't my body. It never had been. The challenge was the gaze—mine and everyone else's. The built world that assumed a mother could run to her child. The poem that wouldn't come. The fear that if I stopped performing resilience, I would disappear.

At 2 p.m. the house was quiet. Daniel was at work. Phoenix was at school. The open door to my study mocked me.

I did what I always did when I couldn't walk: I crawled.

Not to the study. To the memory.

I crawled back to November, power outage, Phoenix, four years old, screaming in the dark. Twelve feet from couch to crib. Six minutes on my elbows and my left side, dragging my right leg, pushing a blanket ahead like a sled. My crutches, useless. The world without balance. I found him. I hummed the hush song about the stork. I held him until the power came back. I wrote the poem after, shaking, because if I didn't, the night would own me.

That was the first time I understood: the door wasn't the problem. The problem was thinking I had to walk through it the same way every time.

Phoenix came home at 4pm with a blue mug and a dandelion he'd pulled from the crack in the driveway. "Mom, I painted this for you", setting it on the floor beside me. I blinked. "Thanks, it's beautiful." For a moment, those bad nights, trying to explain to him why I sometimes cried in the shower seemed to vanish.

He sat on the floor with me. Didn't ask me to get up. Didn't say "try harder." Just sat, his

shoulder against mine, two different people, his unanswered questions making his legs bounce with anticipation, my CP wrapped in depletion making my leg still.

“Read me something,” he said. “Even if it’s bad.”

I couldn’t. But I could listen. He read me his English assignment, a paragraph about a hint of dawn breaking through the darkness. It was messy. It was honest. It was better than anything I’d written in a month.

And something shifted.

The light wasn’t the poem. The light was him, sitting on the floor, not waiting for me to be the mother who ran. Waiting for me to be the mother who was here.

At 6 p.m. Daniel came home. He found us there, on the hallway floor, surrounded by dandelion fluff and a mug with a chipped rim. He didn’t ask why I wasn’t at the desk. He just sat down too.

“Door’s still open,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

“And?”

“And I don’t have to walk through it today. I can sit at the mouth of it.”

That was it... and it wasn't dramatic. There was no sudden flood of words, no miraculous healing. The well didn't refill.

But the rope held...

At 8 p.m., after dinner, after Phoenix was in bed, I went back to the study. I didn't sit at the desk. I sat on the floor, back against the doorframe, door open.

I opened the notebook. The page was still blank.

I wrote one line: Today, I did not write. Today, I stayed.

That was it. That was the poem. That was the story.

The challenge was thinking that motherhood, marriage, poetry, writing—all of it—required me to perform at 100% or not at all. The resolution was understanding that an open door didn't mean I had to sprint through.

Sometimes it's just the floor. Sometimes it's a son with a dandelion. Sometimes it's a dry well that remembers it was once full.

At 10 p.m., I locked the study door for the first time in ten years. Not to keep the world out. To give myself permission to rest inside it.

