

Eleanor Voigt had the oddest job of anyone she knew. She worked eight hours a day in an office where no business was done. Her job was to sit at a desk and stare at the closet door. There was a button on the desk that she was to push if anybody came out that door. There was a big clock on the wall, and, precisely at noon, once a day, she went over to the door and unlocked it with a key she had been given. Inside was an empty closet. There were no trap doors or secret panels in it—she had looked. It was just an empty closet.

If she noticed anything unusual, she was supposed to go back to her desk and press the button.

"Unusual in what way?" she'd asked when she'd been hired. "I don't understand. What am I looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," Mr. Tarblecko had said in that odd accent of his. Mr. Tarblecko was her employer, and some kind of foreigner. He was the creepiest thing imaginable. He had pasty white skin and no hair at all on his head, so that when he took his hat off, he looked like some species of mushroom. His ears were small and almost pointed. Ellie thought he might have some kind of disease. But he paid two dollars an hour, which was good money nowadays for a woman of her age.

At the end of her shift, she was relieved by an unkempt young man who had once blurted out to her that he was a poet. When she came in, in the morning, a heavy Negress would stand up wordlessly, take her coat and hat from the rack, and, with enormous dignity, leave.

So all day Ellie sat behind the desk with nothing to do. She wasn't allowed to read a book, for fear she might get so involved in it that she would stop watching the door. Crosswords were allowed, because they weren't as engrossing. She got a lot of knitting done, and was considering taking up tatting.

Over time, the door began to loom large in her imagination. She pictured herself unlocking it at some forbidden not-noon time and seeing—what? Her imagination failed her. No matter how vividly she visualized it, the door would open onto something mundane. Brooms and mops. Sports equipment. Galoshes and old clothes. What else would there be in a closet? What else *could* there be?

Sometimes, caught up in her imaginings, she would find herself on her feet. Sometimes, she walked to the door. Once, she actually put her hand on the knob before drawing away. But always the thought of losing her job stopped her.

It was maddening.

Twice, Mr. Tarblecko had come to the office while she was on duty. Each time, he was wearing that same black suit with that same narrow black tie. "You have a watch?" he'd asked.

"Yes, sir." The first time, she'd held forth her wrist to show it to him. The disdainful way he ignored the gesture ensured she did not repeat it on his second visit.

"Go away. Come back in forty minutes."

So she had gone out to a little tearoom nearby. She had a bag lunch back in her desk, with a baloney-and-mayonnaise sandwich and an apple, but she'd been so

