

LISA VOGEL

The Door Man

FREELANCE WORK GROWS SPARSE as Russell Zuckerman's reputation spreads: a carpenter who does beautiful work but can't follow simple instructions. Working independently in his dark little workshop without the influence of foreman or crew, he can't help but make little changes. Changes nobody wants. Eventually, unable to pay his heating bill or buy a decent meal, it leaves him no choice but to apply for a regular job. He is hired as a door man by Daily Construction, a company whose technological advances allow a home to be built in a single work shift. It seems a bit rigid for a man of Russell's temperament. On the other hand, what choice does he have?

Right off there are problems. Daily Construction's efficiency experts assign door men to the last shift. Russell prefers to start work first thing. His initial day, he forces himself to sit at home all morning, staring out the window. Even so, he arrives with plenty of time to spare and parks half-way down the street to watch the crew work. He sees that when the guys pull out a two by four from the stack, they don't measure it for themselves. And none of them smooth down edges that don't face out. Russell's hands itch with the desire to pick up his tools and show them how to do things right. At a minute to start time, he drives down the block and pulls into the one spot left in the area designated for parking just as the foreman, Floyd, walks up.

"You got the easiest job on the whole crew," Floyd says. "No kidding."

"All I've ever done is work with wood."

"That's great. Our doors are made with wood. Now, here's the plan. You show up right on time, build the door according to that day's spec, finish just as the rest of the house is done, and install it. Then the guys cheer. What could be simpler?"

Russell says he doesn't know.

"Nothing could be simpler," Floyd tells him. "That's the correct answer."

And because Russell is now a few minutes behind schedule due to their talk, Floyd hurriedly shows him where the spec sheets are posted and helps him set up in his assigned area in the far corner of the site. The frame of the house is already standing and the walls and roof are being nailed into place as Russell gets to work. How busy the guys all seem. Like a swarm of bees desperately trying to put away enough honey for a hard winter scheduled to begin at exactly five o'clock.

Russell barely makes it. Not until 4:50 p.m. does he hoist the just completed door onto his back, gingerly wend his way down the just dried cement path curving through squares of green lawn laid out moments before, and deposit the door in front of the door frame. He tightens the screws that attach the hinges and, with a flourish, swings the door shut. Immediately a cheer goes up among the men, and thus they miss the thud of the door hitting the jamb. Only Russell notices the sound isn't right. He wants to slam it again to diagnose the problem, but Floyd walks up and, unhooking a key indistinguishable from a hundred others hanging from his tool belt, locks the door. En masse, the men make their way to the parking lot.

"Good work," one guy yells out to Russell with a thumbs-up, not even slowing his step. "Mañana," says another, lightly punching him in the shoulder and continuing on before Russell can respond. The guys pile into their trucks, some tucking beer cans between their thighs for the long drive home.

Within moments, Russell stands alone. The sun is about to set. The air has started to chill. "But it doesn't exactly. . ." he sputters. "If only I had more time. . ."

He takes the key out from under the doormat where Floyd had placed it, turns the lock, and swings the door back and forth a few times. Though he'd followed the specs exactly, its weight feels unevenly distributed. Adjustments would result in only slight improvement and, anyway, he'd rather build a new one. But there's not a sliver of wood left on site. What can he do? Shoddy work like this is inexcusable. The only answer is to start a bit earlier the next day.

And so he arrives fifteen minutes before his scheduled time. It is a breach of etiquette unheard of by the crew. Though Floyd looks distinctly displeased and the end of the day's cheers are less exuberant, the door's improvements surely make up for the change in routine. Once everyone leaves, however, Russell scrutinizes the door. It still isn't right. The bevels aren't perfectly straight. And the fit with the jamb? It's too tight in some places, too loose in others.

When Russell comes another fifteen minutes earlier the next morning, Floyd orders him to review the work schedule in the manual. When he shows up another fifteen minutes earlier the day after, fewer of the guys shoot the breeze with him during lunch. By the following week, he eats alone. Yet confident they'll all come around as soon as he builds them a perfect door, he arrives earlier and earlier still.

It's not until his second month that Russell gives in to the gut feeling he's had all along and arrives in the pre-dawn dark before even the animals have awakened. A full moon hangs low in the western sky; the cold glides easily into his lungs and refreshes his skin. As he gathers his share of planks from the

huge pile on site, his mind releases into an ancient quiet that allows his hands to read the grain of the wood solely by feel. The first shock of red in the sky reflects off his saw and shoots a spark through him head to toe. Suddenly he feels himself truly awake. Here, in this particular place, with these individual pieces of wood, at this very moment. He is present, alive, connected to universal principles impossible to articulate and yet completely clear. All of this, and more, he builds into the door.

At eight o'clock Chet, the first man assigned to be on site, pulls up in his grader, rolls down his window, and stares.

Russell has already glued the pieces together. "Look," he says, stepping aside so the man can view the fledgling door. "I finally figured it out."

Chet's eyes bore not into the door, but into Russell. "You early again? After Floyd's told you a dozen times how each job follows the previous one in a logical progression? You're supposed to make a door for the house we build, not have us make a house for your door."

"Don't worry, the door meets the specs. In fact, it goes beyond them—"

"So, you admit it! And what if the house doesn't fit? Will we have to build another one?"

"You're missing the point. Just open your eyes. Look at the door."

Mumbling under his breath about having his own job to do, Chet powers up the grader and begins leveling the site. Russell sighs. His door both includes and transcends the specs. And it is about to be surrounded by a house that merely strives to meet them.

He finishes just after lunch. It's hours before he'll have to hang the door, so Russell lays down in the bed of his truck for a nap. Lulled by a gentle breeze, he descends into a deep sleep, oblivious to the sun coursing down the western sky and dipping behind the trees. The wind picks up and tousles the leaves, creating a pattern of shadow and light that dances across his eyelids. That, and the frantic voices coming from the house yelling, "Where the hell's that door man?" finally wake him.

It's a few minutes before five. Russell races over and installs the door as fast as he can. There's an audible sigh of relief as he finishes with no time to spare, and then the men begin to clear out. "Wait a second, guys," he yells. "You forgot to cheer." No one stops.

The sinking sun tints a soft orange through the house's front windows, clear to the far wall inside. Darkness descends and the breeze dies down. Owls hoot as they claim sections of the eaves for their own and, off in the distance, a coyote howls. Russell walks up to the door and opens it wide. Though he can see nothing of the interior, he feels welcomed. Yes, there is something magical about working outdoors and aligning with the course of nature. He swings the door shut. Its sonorous thud indicates all is well.

For the rest of the winter, Russell arrives before sunrise. His doors continue to evolve, yet they always fit the frame. So, why doesn't the crew appreciate them? He can't understand it. Then early spring comes. Newborn stalks pierce up out of the ground as leaves on the trees unfurl, and with them a deep frustration begins to take root in his heart. While the guys continue to show up at their assigned times, Russell must come earlier and earlier to stay in synch with the sun. It means that one day he is in the middle of sanding down his new door when Chet arrives. The next day he is varnishing it. The following day he is already setting it out to dry.

"Why don't you see a doctor about that insomnia of yours?" Chet says one morning. "Or whatever the hell your problem is. There are regulations about these things. What if you get us shut down?"

Russell pays him no mind. That Thursday he's attaching the knobs just as Chet shows up and grimaces. That Friday he's polishing them to a mirror-like shine to Chet's scowls. The following Monday, every aspect of the door complete, Russell looks up to catch Chet's latest reaction. Chet and his reaction are nowhere to be seen.

Now what? Russell carries the door to within the house's perimeter and rests it up against a tree. Cocking his head to one side and peering at it through a rectangle made with his thumbs and index fingers, he sees how pleasingly the eye travels around the door's edges. How harmoniously the shadows dance across its grain. But who is he kidding? When the guys show up, forget congratulations. They'll just mutter about organization and the manual's proclamations. At the end of the day, when the door fits the frame, that still won't be enough. No, they won't be satisfied unless their door man squeezes himself into a frame, too.

Dejected, Russell strolls about the yard. He tries to guess where a swing set will be located and what might get planted, row by row, in a little garden of flowers or herbs. But those are decisions the occupants will make, amorphous figures he can only picture as silhouettes with big question marks duct-taped to their foreheads. Russell takes a seat on a large round rock in what is designated to become the living room, but almost immediately feels himself forced back up. In a moment of blinding intensity so quick it's impossible to capture in memory, he installs the door into the vacant lot.

But into what? As soon as it's done, Russell can't comprehend what's just happened, and he bends over for a closer look. Rippling streams of air flow between the earth and the bottom of the door. He places his finger in their path and feels a gentle current, not unpleasant to the skin. But this is impossible! He knocks on the door with his fist, noting its solidity. He grasps the knob and pulls. It opens with perfect ease. He presses against it ever so gently with his pinkie. It smoothly swings shut, smooth.

A lightness comes over Russell, as if his tool belt has slipped off his waist and fallen into the dirt. He has created something so totally new, perhaps a white-gloved curator from the science and technology museum in the city would want to acquire the door. She'd need to examine it first, of course, and ask him a whole slew of questions.

"How did the concept first come to you?"

"Afterwards." But she'd never believe that.

"What were you thinking at the moment of creation?"

"Thinking?" All he did was the doing.

"What was the exact time of completion?"

Well, that he could answer. It was only a few minutes ago. He checks his watch. It's now 7:57 a.m., so it would have been—Russell gasps. 7:57 a.m.? And just then, a billow of dust spurts over the hilltop, snakes through the switchbacks, and races along the valley floor. He stands in front of the door in a desperate attempt to hide as much of it as possible, his screwdriver quivering in his hand. As the grader skids to a stop, pebbles spew out from under the tires.

"What in hell did you do?" Chet's eyes are like missiles aimed straight at the door.

"Oh, you know me. Always being different."

"You hung a goddamn door in the... in the..." Chet bangs his hand on the dashboard. "Asshole!"

"I guess I got a little ahead of myself."

Chet's mouth drops open so wide that his chin almost rests on his chest.

"It doesn't change anything," Russell continues. "I mean fundamentally. The house will still fit the door. I mean the door will fit—"

"And how the hell are we going to work around that thing? I'm as good as the next guy," Chet pats his controls, "but I ain't no frigging miracle worker." Not waiting for a response, Chet begins to level, slowing way down and giving the door a wide berth whenever he gets remotely near it. After a number of passes, he gives up and moves on to another section. The ground around the door never does get flattened.

Oscar arrives in the cement truck next. He comes to a screeching halt and sits in his cab in amazement.

"Don't worry," Russell calls out. "It won't cause any trouble."

"No trouble? With that thing in the middle of my plot?"

"Sure, I've got it all figured out. All you have to do—"

"Never noticed nothing wrong with how we did it before." Oscar jumps out of his truck. "And like it says in the manual, if a crew don't work together, we all fuck up." He turns his back to Russell and begins setting up foundation forms. But every time he gets near the door, he loses track

of his measuring and has to start again. After half a dozen attempts, he gives up and uses what he's got. None of his angles are ninety degrees.

And so it goes. As each man arrives, he is at first jolted by the sight of the door and then appalled at having to work near it. Though the site soon fills with the sounds of nail guns firing, portable generators sputtering, and men cursing, their timing is off. Gear is dropped and broken at an incredible rate. Guys run into each other as they try in vain to get their own jobs done, though the previous guy hasn't cleared out yet and the next one is already in the way. It's not long before the first aid box runs out of bandages, and they must resort to the oily rags stashed behind the seats in their trucks to stanch their wounds. Floyd flips wildly through the pages of his well-worn copy of the manual but can't find anything that addresses the issue at hand.

Since Russell is done with his job for the day, he offers to assist first one guy and then another. But no one wants him to help carry heavy equipment. He just gets bumped out of the way. No one asks for a tool to be fetched, and when he figures out what's needed and brings it anyhow, it's laid aside unused. Finally he gives up and returns to his truck, where his lunch sits nestled in his battered red ice chest. Why not eat now? So what if it's early? Russell drops his tailgate, spreads out his meal, and tucks his napkin into his T-shirt. Just then Floyd walks over with his own sandwich clutched in his hand and sits down next to him on the tailgate, accidentally flattening Russell's cupcake in the process.

"Thirty-two years with Daily Construction," Floyd says between chews. "Been with 'em since day one. We were all like you in the old days, Russell. Doing how our daddies taught us or how we figured out on our own. Thought nobody had the right to order us around. When the company started up with all these regulations, we pulled all kinds of crap. I've seen some real doozies. Done my share, too." Floyd motions to the door with the hand that holds his sandwich. "That little prank of yours, it's good. One of the best I've ever seen. Not a guy here can figure out how you did it. The thing is, those days are over. Sure, he who laughs last laughs best. But no one's laughing now. Not even you."

Russell watches a bit of tuna salad squeeze out from between Floyd's bread slices and plop to the ground. A tiny atom bomb of dust erupts.

"Guys want to get along with you, son. But you gotta meet 'em halfway. Take down that door."

Suddenly Russell hears complete silence around him. The guys have all stopped working and come in close. Pretending he doesn't know they're there, he stands up, rubs off a splat of bird droppings from his side mirror and, seeing no better place, wipes the gunk onto his pants. "Okay," he says. "I'll do it."

How cold and impassive the door seems as he walks up to it from behind. He takes a breath, pulls his hard hat low, and walks around to the front. Suddenly he's angry. He's been used! Yes, him. A simple carpenter, a regular working stiff just trying to get by. All he did was build a door, an exceptional door, sure, but he had nothing to do with the installation. The door practically pulled itself out of his hands with a force of its own.

Russell grabs the knob and slams the door shut with all his strength, once, twice, even a third time, giving it every opportunity to fall over. The door refuses to cooperate. It stands upright, oblivious to his efforts. He punches it. Not a mark is left. He throws rocks, also with no effect. He jumps into Chet's grader, determined to pulverize the door into splinters, but he can't get the damn thing started. And does Chet or anyone else offer to help? No, they just stand around as though they're at a boring cocktail party with no one they want to talk to and nothing but those sissy wine coolers to drink.

Finally, Russell admits defeat. He walks over to the shadow side of the port-o-potty and leans against it for support. From there he watches the frame raised around the door and the walls banged into place. The whole structure sits on the earth precariously, but what can the guys do? The sun is lowering in the sky, and there's still plenty of work left.

An hour later a new, white, spotlessly clean SUV pulls up. Maurice the building inspector has come for the walk-through. He makes a beeline for the door. Silently, as Floyd nervously watches, he scrutinizes both sides of it, running his finger over every surface as though checking for dust. Then he pulls out a measuring tape and records figures in a black book. Not bothering to check the rest of the house, Maurice returns to the SUV, writes out copious comments, signs a dozen forms, and hands Floyd his copies before speeding off.

With a crook of his finger, Floyd motions Russell over. "It doesn't break any codes exactly. Falls right through the cracks. Just the same, I can't let you pull this kind of stunt again." He shakes his head. "I never fired a door man before. Who would have thought there was a man alive who couldn't handle the job? Take wood, build door. Damn." Floyd hurries off to help a trainee who is about to attempt a maneuver likely to saw off his own leg if he's successful and something worse if he's not.

Russell can go home. His services are no longer required. But he waits until the tape around the windows gets pulled up after the paint job and the last square of sod is laid in the yard. The guys who are finished meander about, knocking on walls and fence posts in hopes of locating the one repair job that will make things right, while Floyd flips through his checklist to ensure that at least everything is complete. Yet nothing looks the way the pictures in the manual demand. As the sun drops another fraction of an inch,

the long shadows of late afternoon meet, enveloping the house and men together in gloom.

Suddenly, Russell figures out what to do. “The door’s already installed,” he yells. “Remember? The house is done.”

No one says a word. Limping and bruised, they silently pack into their trucks. Russell hopes a few will remember the good times and wave good-bye. At least give him a little nod. But no one does, and soon he is alone. Night brings no comfort as it overpowers the sky. Though indistinguishable from the darkness behind it, the house’s presence remains. Not until around midnight does a half moon, shrouded by clouds, rise and provide just enough light for him to notice how badly one of the windows is off kilter. When it emerges, the moon highlights how the fence rises higher in front than behind, and as it transverses the sky, it discloses other mistakes. The pitch of the roof is too sharp on one side, a bit flat on the other. The whole structure leans slightly to one side. It’s almost dawn before he confirms it. Every single aspect of the house is a failure. Except the door.

As the first touch of sun blooms in the eastern sky, Russell sees a headlight gliding along the road coming down from the crest of the hills. Who could it be? Have some of the guys returned to teach him a lesson? Russell tries to run, but his feet are as heavy as if someone has slipped magnets in his work boots and thrown him onto a cast-iron floor.

The station wagon that pulls up is rusted out, forest green, and upwards of a dozen years old. From out of the driver’s side pops a bespectacled young woman with a look of awe on her face. White gloves encase each hand.

“Mr. Zuckerman?” she asks breathlessly. “The door man?”

He nods.

“Mimi Lahain, curator with the science and technology museum. Word is spreading faster than news about a UFO in a cornfield. About a remarkable door. Where is it?”

“I think you’ve been misinformed — ”

There is a rumble behind Russell, a landslide of wood, metal and glass. He turns just in time to see the house collapse to the ground. When all is done, a few beams jag upward at odd angles, plaster dust floats aimlessly in the air, but most of the building lies flat to the earth as if trying to bury itself underground. Except the door. It alone hovers above the debris.

“Oh, my!” the woman gasps. “There it is. I couldn’t see it with all that junk in the way.”

Russell returns his attention to her. “It’s just a door.”

“Oh, Mr. Zuckerman! An incredible breakthrough like this? You’re too modest. Would you be so kind as to give me a tour?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean. . . .” Russell shrugs. “Sure.”

He leads her through the rubble and is almost to the door when he detects a bit of red emanating from its center, as if a newborn heart within had begun to pump. What in the world—

“Such mastery! You positioned it at the perfect angle to reflect the rising sun.” She places one palm in the middle of the red glow on the door, her other palm at the center of her chest, and sighs. “I can feel my heart opening.”

“Oh, you know,” Russell says. “Trick of the trade. Any door man could have done it.”

“Yet no door man ever has. Please, if it’s not too much trouble, would you demonstrate its operation?” She takes a step back to give him plenty of room.

Russell grasps the knob. How warm and inviting it feels. He opens the door slowly and then motions for the woman to step inside. “You can go first.”

“Why, I’d be honored.” With no hesitation, she steps in. “My goodness!” She takes a few more steps. “I’ve never experienced anything like this.” Her voice seems distant. “Mr. Zuckerman? Are you coming?”

Suddenly Russell’s legs are shaking, his head pounds in a deep primordial beat, and he has a practically uncontrollable urge to pee.

“Mr. Zuckerman?” Her voice echoes from far away. “Where are you?”

The warmth of the sun beams down on the back of his neck. A bird chirps and another responds. A breeze blows, almost too gentle to feel at first, then picks up and scatters leaves. One pops in through the doorway and lies just across the threshold in front of his feet.

“I’m coming,” Russell yells. He steps in and looks around, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the soft, pulsating colors and gently swirling shapes. He feels himself drawn forward, faster and faster. From somewhere now far behind, he hears the thud of a door slam shut, solid and sure.