

# Opening the Door

By Robert M. Grossman

It was 3:30 a.m. Someone was ringing the doorbell incessantly. In my half-awakened state, I thought it might be my son, Ted. I groped for my bathrobe, made my way down the stairs and approached the window next to the front door.

It wasn't Ted. In his hoped-for place stood a young black man in his early 20's, dressed not unlike Ted and looking at me plaintively through the window. The ringing stopped. He appeared relieved to see me.

"I'm a friend of your neighbor's son," he said loudly through the glass and without hesitation, his arms raised in an almost prayerful pose. "I've been ringing their doorbell but nobody answers. My car broke down on the Drive. I've been studying for exams all night and I forgot my wallet. Can I use your phone?"

I knew all I had to do was turn around and climb back up the stairs. In due course he would leave. Something held me there, though. It was the same something that originally caused me to stay in the city – that continued to keep me there. At the time I was a partner in a national law firm that was founded over 100 years ago and had more than

300 lawyers. Most of my partners lived in one suburb or another. A number did live in the city, though only a few lived on the South Side, where I chose to dwell. What would any of them do? I had little doubt that most would climb right back up the stairs. And how far behind them would I be?

I can't say how much of this crossed my mind as I stared through the window. What I did conjure up was the appearance of a black actor from the play "Six Degrees of Separation" appearing at my front door. Should I ignore this young stranger, even at such a disquieting hour? Should I turn my back on someone whose age and attire, aside from his color, could make him my own son, who appeared to have no weapon, no stealth, no rage? Would I respond differently if he were white? Was I really who I thought I was? I sensed the risks in those fleeting moments when I had to make a hard decision. I felt myself moving to the door, somehow inwardly secure in what I was about to do.

He leaned toward me, one arm resting against the door's left frame and only the night air separating us. "I want to call next door. I've got to get my car towed , but I don't have any money. This is the worst night of my life."

We stepped into the kitchen; he dialed a number but apparently got no answer. Suddenly, my wife appeared, obviously awakened by our voices downstairs. After explaining what had happened in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could muster, I looked directly at him and asked what he was going to do now, gently trying to move him on his way.

“I don’t know what I’ll do. If I miss my first exam, I’m in trouble.”

My wife and I looked at each other. We intuitively knew what was coming next.

“Could you give me some money? I’ll pay you back tomorrow.”

My wallet was upstairs and I was not about to leave my wife to get it. Quickly sensing my predicament, she opened a cupboard drawer where she kept some cash. While she was reaching for the money, I handed him a pad, asking for his name and telephone number. He immediately wrote out the information, including his address. My wife pulled out \$30 from her hideaway and gave it to him.

“Thanks. I’ll be back. I’ll pay you the money.” He then left.

We climbed the stairs and went back to bed with a feeling that the risk seemed worth taking, regardless of whether we ever saw him again. When I got to the office five hours later, though, the lawyer in me dialed the number he had written down. A woman answered who identified herself as his mother. She said he wasn’t there and wanted to know why I was calling. There was a beseeching tone in her voice. I told her who I was and what had happened earlier that morning. She asked for my phone number. I paused after providing it but she said nothing further.

“He seems like a fine young man who had a hard night,” I finally said. “I hope he made it to his exam. Goodbye.”

I hung up, looked out the window momentarily, then turned to my work. Within the hour she called back. This time her voice was taut and she spoke in staccato sentences. “My son is a drug addict. He’s on coke most of the time. This has destroyed our family. His father’s long gone from here. Thank God he did you no harm. He has no control of himself when he’s filled with the stuff, except he can con anyone for money to buy more. After talking to you, I called the treatment center. They told me he bolted from last night’s session. Don’t ever give him money again.” She paused. “I’ve tried so hard. This is an essentially good boy, a capable boy.” She stopped, quickly said goodbye and hung up.

I was stunned as I slumped back in my chair. I felt mostly pain and anger. I had been conned into opening my door before dawn. Is that something I wanted anyone to know? Before calling his mother, I had a renewed sense of pride in not having climbed back up the stairs – and a quiet sense of relief as I sat in my corner office, some 80 stories high, looking out over the city. In fact, the sense of pride is part of what impelled me to dial the number he left. Now I looked like a reckless fool. Telling any of my partners what had happened, even those who were my close friends, would only confirm their judgment about life in the city. It might have confirmed their unspoken judgment about me as well.

All this went through my head as I leaned back and stared at the ceiling. I also felt emerging that side of me that was not about to be conned – by him or anyone else. No, I said to myself, I’m going to con him right back. I’m going to con him in a way he never expected.

In the days that followed, I pondered my strategy. I then made my first move, searching for and finding the *sine qua non* of my con. I went straight to a friend who was a prominent black minister. After I explained what happened, he agreed to serve as a strong father figure. We then met with the mother who corralled her son and brought him to us. I proceeded to work with him on his studies, his mother kept a closer eye on his movements and the minister met with him weekly to help bring a moral dimension to his life. For all of that, keeping him straight and clean of drugs was a long and halting struggle with a wavering and uncertain outcome. But it was a far better climb than the one back up the stairs.