



SHORT STORY

Higher English model exemplar • 1,282 words

Teacher-created model exemplar for learning and discussion. This must not be submitted or adapted as a candidate's own folio work.

The Last Door

The door had remained closed since Mum died. Each morning, I passed without touching the handle, allowing myself to believe that the lock — not my guilt — was keeping me out. Even now, with the rest of the house reduced to labelled boxes and pale rectangles where pictures had hung, the door remained untouched at the end of the hall. Tomorrow, strangers would arrive with keys and measuring tape. Tonight, there was only one room left to empty.

I carried the final box upstairs. The house answered every step: a pipe clicked behind the wall; floorboards complained beneath my weight. Without furniture, familiar rooms had acquired an echo. Mum would have hated it. She filled silence instinctively — with the radio, the kettle, or stories told from three rooms away. I had spent the afternoon packing the evidence of that noise: recipe books stained with sauce, chipped ornaments, batteries saved because they might still have "a wee bit of life in them". Ordinary things. Safe things. None had required me to open her door.

A brass key lay in my pocket. Aunt Claire had pressed it into my hand after the funeral. "For when you're ready," she had said. I never asked how she knew the room was locked. Perhaps I had told her. Perhaps, after repeating it for six months, I had forgotten that the story began with me.

I had opened every other door that day. I had emptied the bathroom cabinet, stripped sheets from the spare bed and climbed into the loft where spiders had inherited the Christmas decorations. I worked methodically, sealing each box. Whenever I reached the landing, however, I found another task downstairs. The fridge needed cleaning. The cutlery required sorting. Grief, I discovered, could be postponed by almost anything if you gave the almost anything sufficient importance.



I set the box down. Beneath the door, a thin strip of darkness divided the carpet. For an instant, I smelled Mum's perfume: lavender and something sharper, the scent that clung to her scarves and followed her down the stairs. My body remembered before my mind did. I was seventeen again, standing outside the hospital lift while its doors opened and closed. Aunt Claire had texted: *She's asking for you*. I had replied that I was on my way. Then I sat in the cafe downstairs until visiting hours ended.

The memory passed. The scent remained.

I knelt beside the keyhole. Nothing waited beyond it but darkness, yet I imagined the room preserved exactly as she had left it: the blue cardigan across the chair, a paperback folded face-down, the water glass marked by her lipstick. In my imagination, time had stopped politely at the door. Inside, Mum was still ill but alive. Outside, I was still a daughter who might visit tomorrow.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. The estate agent: *Just confirming 9 a.m.* I turned it face-down on the carpet. Above the message sat a notification I had ignored for months — one saved voicemail. Mum's final message. I knew its shape without playing it: eleven seconds, received Thursday at 4:06. She died on Friday morning. I had told myself I could not listen because hearing her voice would make losing her real. The truth was worse. I was afraid she would ask why I had not come.

There had always been a reason. Homework. A shift at the supermarket. A cancelled bus. Each excuse sounded reasonable alone, which was how I arranged them in my memory: separately, never allowing them to form a pattern. Mum helped me. "Come tomorrow," she would say. "I'm too tired tonight anyway." I accepted every escape she offered, mistaking her kindness for permission. On Thursday, I promised myself that Saturday would be different. By Friday, there was no Saturday left to give her.

Rain began against the landing window. Its reflection trembled over the door, making the brass handle appear to move. From behind it came a faint scrape.

I stood so quickly that my shoulder struck the wall. The house settled around me. Pipes, I decided. A branch. A mouse with unusually dramatic timing. Still,



my hand closed around the key. Cold metal pressed into my palm as another sound slipped beneath the door: three soft notes from Mum's music box. I had packed it that afternoon from the living-room cabinet. It was downstairs, wrapped in newspaper.

The notes came again — not from the bedroom, I realised, but from memory. Mum winding the tiny silver handle. Mum singing the wrong words. Mum in the hospital bed on my first and only visit, two weeks before she died, her hands suddenly too narrow for her rings. She had smiled when I arrived, and I had spent twenty minutes watching the clock above her head. When she reached for me, I pretended to search my bag. I could not bear the weakness in her grip. Afterwards, I promised I would be better next time.

There was no next time.

I lifted the key towards the lock. My hand shook badly enough for the teeth to scratch the painted wood. Once the door opened, the room would become a room again. Mum would be absent from it. There would be dust instead of time, an empty bed instead of another chance. I lowered the key, almost relieved by my failure, and rested my palm against the handle.

It moved.

The latch withdrew with a quiet click. No resistance. No key. The door drifted inward as though it had been waiting for the smallest pressure. I stared at the useless brass key in my hand. Mum had never locked the door. I had passed it every day, building bolts from fear and adding a new one each time I said later. The barrier had been mine, and I had guarded it faithfully.

The room was smaller than I remembered. Dust softened the furniture, and the curtains were only half drawn. The cardigan still hung across the chair, but the bed had been stripped. On the bedside table stood the lipstick-marked glass beside a packet of lemon sweets I had brought on that first visit and promised to replace when they ran out. They never had.

I sat on the edge of the mattress and pressed play on the voicemail.

For a second there was only the rustle of sheets. Then Mum breathed my name. Her voice was thinner than memory but unmistakably hers. "Don't worry about



coming tonight, love. I know hospitals frighten you. Tomorrow will do." A pause. In the background, a trolley rattled past. "Just phone me when you can."

The message ended. No accusation. No final lesson prepared for the guilty. Only Mum making my absence easier, even then. I played it again, not because the words changed, but because I did. The grief I had kept outside the room arrived without drama. I bent forward and cried into the blue cardigan until lavender rose from the wool and faded into dust.

Dawn had begun to colour the curtains when I carried the first box inside. I packed the glass, the book and the lemon sweets. I folded the cardigan last. The room emptied slowly, losing its power with every object I touched. Opening the door could not return me to Thursday afternoon or place my hand inside Mum's. It could not turn cowardice into kindness. But it allowed the truth to enter: I had failed her once, and she had loved me anyway.

Before leaving, I pulled the curtains wide. Morning light stretched across Mum's empty room and spilled into the hallway, reaching the place where I had stood for six months. At the front door, I looked back. The bedroom door rested open behind me. For the first time, I stepped away without pulling it closed.

Essay Feedback

Suggested mark: 15/15

This is an atmospheric and carefully structured short story. It explores grief, guilt and avoidance through the narrator's fear of entering their late mother's bedroom.

The locked door is not simply part of the setting. It becomes a developing motif for the emotional barrier the narrator has created.

What works particularly well?

1. The opening immediately creates mystery

"The door had remained closed since Mum died."

This raises immediate questions: Why has it remained closed? What is inside? Why is the narrator afraid to enter?



The next sentence introduces the deeper meaning:

“I passed without touching the handle, allowing myself to believe that the lock — not my guilt — was keeping me out.”

The reader quickly understands that the real conflict is emotional rather than physical.

2. The setting creates an unsettling atmosphere

The almost-empty house feels unfamiliar and uncomfortable:

“Without furniture, familiar rooms had acquired an echo.”

The clicking pipes, complaining floorboards, rain and strip of darkness beneath the door create tension. These details make the house appear almost haunted without confirming anything supernatural.

3. Mum is brought to life through ordinary details

Although Mum has died before the story begins, the reader develops a clear impression of her personality.

She filled silence with:

“the radio, the kettle, or stories told from three rooms away.”

Her habit of keeping old batteries because they might contain “a wee bit of life” adds warmth and gentle humour. These specific details make her feel like a real person rather than simply “the dead mother.”

4. The narrator is flawed but sympathetic

The narrator avoided visiting Mum because they could not cope with seeing her ill. This is a serious failure, but the story helps the reader understand the fear behind it.

“Each excuse sounded reasonable alone.”

This is an insightful observation. The narrator has arranged each excuse separately to avoid recognising a pattern of behaviour.

The reader may disagree with the narrator’s choices while still understanding them. This creates a complex and convincing character.



5. The door motif develops throughout

The door represents different things as the story progresses:

- The closed door represents avoidance.
- The imagined lock represents denial.
- Sounds and smells beneath it represent returning memories.
- The key represents the narrator preparing for confrontation.
- The unlocked handle reveals that the barrier was self-created.
- The open door represents acceptance.

Every recurrence moves the story and the narrator's understanding forward.

6. The apparently supernatural details build suspense

Mum's perfume seems to drift from beneath the door, the handle appears to move and the narrator hears notes from the music box.

The story then reveals:

“The notes came again—not from the bedroom, I realised, but from memory.”

This shows that the narrator is being haunted psychologically by guilt and grief, rather than necessarily by a ghost.

7. Sentence structure controls the pace

Short paragraphs are used at important moments:

“The memory passed. The scent remained.”

“There was no next time.”

“It moved.”

These brief statements slow the reader down and give the moments greater impact.

Longer sentences are used for memories and descriptions, while shorter sentences build tension around the door. This demonstrates deliberate control.



8. The twist is prepared carefully

The revelation that the door was never locked is surprising, but it does not feel random:

“The latch withdrew with a quiet click. No resistance. No key.”

Earlier clues prepare the reader:

- Nobody has actually tested the door.
- The narrator cannot remember how the story of the lock began.
- Aunt Claire may simply have believed what the narrator told her.
- The narrator repeatedly finds reasons not to approach it.

This makes the twist meaningful rather than gimmicky.

9. The voicemail avoids an easy solution

Mum’s final message contains no accusation:

“Don’t worry about coming tonight, love. I know hospitals frighten you.”

This is more painful because Mum was still protecting the narrator. The message does not magically remove the guilt, but it allows grief to replace fear.

The line:

“I played it again, not because the words changed, but because I did.”

clearly captures the narrator’s turning point.

10. The ending transforms the opening

At the beginning, the door is closed and the narrator remains outside.

At the end:

“The bedroom door rested open behind me.”

The narrator cannot undo the past, but they no longer need to hide Mum, the room or their grief behind a closed door.

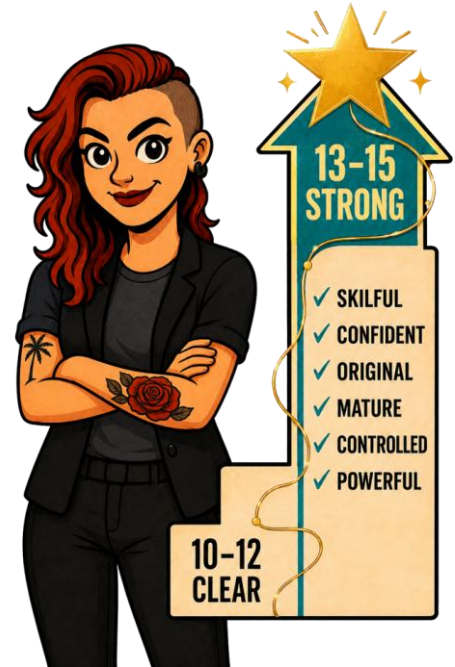


The morning light spilling into the hallway also contrasts with the earlier darkness beneath the door. This creates a satisfying sense of completion.

Why would this reach the top range?

The story demonstrates:

- ✓ Strong attention to purpose and audience.
- ✓ A compelling opening.
- ✓ A convincing and distinctive narrator.
- ✓ Skilful creation of atmosphere.
- ✓ Effective characterisation.
- ✓ Controlled pacing.
- ✓ Carefully chosen sensory details.
- ✓ A motif whose meaning develops.
- ✓ A meaningful and well-prepared twist.
- ✓ An ending which echoes and transforms the opening.
- ✓ Varied sentence structures and strong technical accuracy.



Even better if...

There is very little requiring improvement. The story focuses on one setting, one central conflict and one important night. It does not attempt to cover the narrator's entire life.

When writing your own short story, avoid adding a twist simply to shock the reader. A successful twist should reveal something important about the character or theme. Here, the unlocked door reveals that guilt — not a physical lock — has kept the narrator outside.

Overall

This is a moving, controlled and skilfully structured short story. The developing locked-door motif unites the setting, suspense, character and deeper meaning.

The key lesson is:

In a strong short story, the central object should not merely appear repeatedly—it should help reveal something important about the character.

Suggested mark: 15/15

