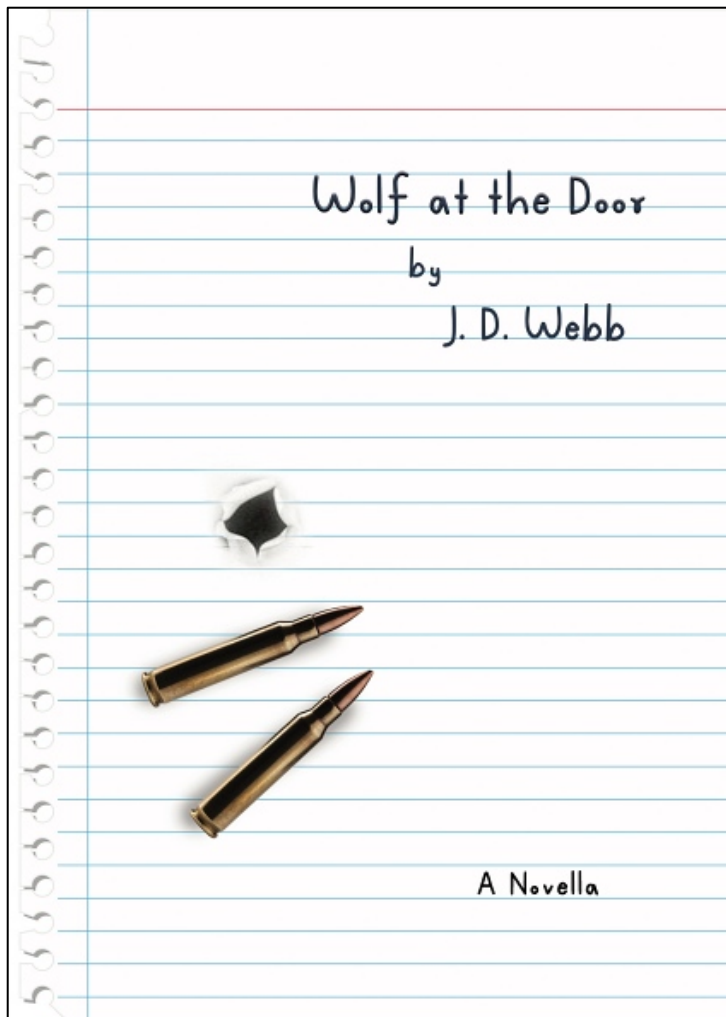


*A harrowing tale of what
our children face
everyday across America.*



Wolf at The Door
By J.D. Webb

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A Novella

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-958889-60-2

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-958889-61-9

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-492-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Webb, J.D.

Wolf at The Door by J.D. Webb

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023907088

1

Sometimes I just stare out the window, through the thick glass, pretending they're not here. The men in their white coats, asking me questions, so serious, as they take note of every response. Everyone wants to know why, whether they ask me straight up or not. Sometimes it feels like I'm Jesus and any second I'm going to say something that cures all the world's sins. Nothing can cure this world's sins.

It makes me sick. All I seem to do in here is talk, talk, talk.

You may have read about it. I'm sure there are volumes being produced about it somewhere, about what happened. I heard they're starting to offer degrees in it, well, courses at least. Can you believe that? At those crappy universities. You know the ones people go to because they think it'll get them a job, when all it really gets them is a load of debt, some middle-level management position, and deep self-loathing? So I wanted to tell you about my parents. People think they're

responsible for this, kind of in some way behind what happened. I guess they had me, right? Trust me, I've thought for a long time about how nice it would be to just erase myself from time, like I never existed. But it's not my parents' fault. It's only that some people will look for anything to explain the world to them.

My dad was in the army, he died when I was four years old. My mother used to talk about him all the time, and now I don't know if I remember him myself or just remember what she used to say about him. Maybe it's better I remember the picture she painted of him: army, a ranger who died trying to save one of his men. A hero. But I don't remember how he felt, or what he smelled like. I think smell is so important. People don't put enough emphasis on smell. You can tell a lot about a person just from the way they smell. Anyway, he was on tour in Iraq, and he was killed by sniper fire. That's what they said. It killed my mother.

My mother was a very different person from my father. She was a poet, like for real, she'd spend days working on which word fit where. She introduced me to Byron and Keats, Shakespeare and Fitzgerald and Plath.

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Forget English class, that was for amateurs. My mother taught me the value of words. It made me different from other kids though, but it brought me closer to her. She had moved with her stepfather, my grandfather Frank, to Shermont Hills in New Jersey from Cambridge, England. She said she preferred Jersey to Cambridge but I could tell it wasn't true when she said it. It was like she was trying to convince herself, embarrassed to say she missed home. Of course she tried to be as American as possible. She was a meek lady, caring, and it's hard for me to talk about it, but she was practically an angel. Maybe most kids remember their mothers like angels. I remember her putting me to bed night after night. When I was younger she'd always tuck me up, kiss my head and in that moment the light in the ceiling would catch her hair and it would look like she had a halo. It was beautiful. That's how I like to remember her, with an angelic halo, telling me she loved me, not how it was at the end.

I don't think the day in question started like any other day. I woke up and for a split second I forgot how I had to survive another day at school. I was tired, I know that for sure. My life had been nothing but AP Physics, French

4, Pre-Calculus, AP English 3 and US History, over and over. Oh yeah, and basically trying to blend into the shadows between those classes, working until three in the morning every day just to stay on top of stuff. But before we talk about the day it all happened we should talk about the incident.

You know there are people out there that want to maim and kill and everyone on TV is like, those guys are monsters. That's true, they are, you know? You can't want to kill people without qualifying for that title. At the same time there's a mother somewhere sitting at home remembering how that same monster used to run around the house with a Fischer Price phone just being a sweet little kid. How she used to wipe dirt off his cheek or give him a bath, that kind of stuff. Then there's this switch that makes kids into monsters and good people do terrible things. That's what fascinates everyone, right? It's like there's a wolf at the door and you know it's there and one day you just decide to open the door and let all hell break loose. The incident was like that. I guess people should've seen the warnings. I didn't do anything to provoke it, but maybe if I took after my dad more I could've defended

myself better from it. It's the hollow knocking that I can't seem to forget. I still get headaches too, which they say will go away, but who knows? What if they don't, like ever?

I don't know where you went to school but Shermont is pretty normal for a high school. There were a lot of kids, in my year alone, I think about five-hundred and sixty. The year above me had nine-hundred. As for the people, we really had a mixed bag. There were some real freaks. Then there were the usual suspects: the football players, jocks, about as dumb as they are in the movies; the theatre kids, who would act out scenes and never cared if anyone was watching, really emotional, always making a big deal out of everything, though not one of them was killed, only one taking a ricochet because of where they were standing; the goths; the geeks; and the majority. The majority wore the same clothes, listened to whatever music was popular, thought whatever they were told. They hide in a great sea of nothingness and pretend that they're OK because they're as normal as you can possibly be. A few of them bit it, but apart from their

parents no one will miss them. Then there's the Asian mafia, but I'll come to them.

I won't ever forget that day. I mean being there was horrendous, like puke your guts out awful. If you've never been in that situation try to picture a warzone. I was there, hiding. I remember a click, then the thin line of light between the cupboard doors expanding. The smell of gun powder, and the sound of sobbing fills my dark hiding place in the school science lab. A black army boot, then a gas mask.

"You're OK now, Son. He killed himself," a deep voice says in an unusual southern accent. "You can come out."

The first body I see is Todd's, in the middle of the floor. He's spread eagle. Body armor strapped to him, his head tilted unnaturally to one side. The mask he was wearing is blown off and part of his face is missing. An AR-15 assault rifle lies on the classroom floor, there's a Glock beside it and a .45 still loosely grasped in his dead hand. I look away, feeling nauseous. SWAT officers with rifles run in slow motion past the door on their way down the hall. I cough, trying to breathe through the smoke and

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a suffocating heaviness in the air I assume must be filled with tear gas.

“Try not to look down,” the muffled voice of the SWAT officer says.

He guides me to the door. I step over bodies. They look like dolls, scattered across the floor. Sally Harris, Ashley Taylor, Carrie Wells, they were so alive, begging for their lives only a few minutes ago. I cough again. I watch Sally’s face as I step around her. Her eyes are lifeless, staring at the ceiling. I feel numb. Sally’s a month older than me, her eighteenth birthday was in two weeks.

“Let’s get you outside,” the officer says.

We walk through the metal double-doors I’ve walked through every day since my first morning of ninth grade, and step into the cool autumn air outside Shermont High. I can see others being escorted out now. Some need help to walk, others just look like zombies - walking dead.

“You need to stand by the wall. Give your name to the Sarge. You’re OK now, Son,” he says, patting me on the shoulder. Out here it feels like the whole world has arrived and the sound is deafening. Television crews frantically scramble for position around cop cars,

ambulances, fire-trucks, black SUVs with blacked-out windows, an armored car with *SWAT* painted on the side. This is the real deal. It may be more cops and paramedics than I've ever seen before in my life.

Sally Harris's mother is twenty yards away, talking with a State Trooper at the perimeter set up with yellow police tape. She's asking to be let in.

"Jeffrey?" she says, seeing me. "Jeff? Is she OK? Is she *OK!*"

I look up at her.

"Jeffrey, is Sally OK?" she repeats, there's a note of hope in her voice as she nods, in a kind of impatient way. The cop restraining her turns to look at me now. I pause, then shake my head no.

Sally's mother freezes. She backs away. Her mouth is open but there's no sound. Then it all comes out, she screams louder than I've ever heard anyone scream before, it's like the sound of a wounded animal. I see her start to fall forward, then collapse into the arms of the trooper, like she's dead herself. It was mean, I guess, to just tell her like that, with a shake of the head, like she had just asked me if I wanted her to make me a sandwich

or something. Sally's mom had never been mean to me. After all, I'd known her daughter since kindergarten.

I turn, it's too hard to look at her now. We are ushered to the mural that reads "Shermont High Welcomes You!" on the wall by the drop-off. It was the parking lot just round the corner where the incident happened, where Sally watched and laughed while Todd did the deed. A sergeant has us stand against the wall, taking down our details and ticking us off a roster I guess he got from the office. He looks like he knows what he's doing.

"We won't be long kids. Just have to make sure we know who is safe."

Bit late for that.

Jessie Baker is standing beside me. She's crying so hard I barely notice her acne for once. In fact, she's kind of shrieking. The Sergeant stops by her, puts his hand on her shoulder.

"Sweetie we're going to be done in a minute, I know it's hard," he says gently. "You take care of her Son, we're all in this together."

I nod. I feel weak looking at him. I put my hand on Jessie's shoulder and she shakes it off.

“Stay away from me,” she hisses. Then her face softens. “I’m sorry,” she says trying to smile, but more tears run down her face. “There were pieces of them... everywhere,” she whispers.

Mister Price, a school counsellor, is arguing loudly now with the sergeant and a man in a trench coat, who looks like one of those detectives you see in the movies. “You found the shooter! These kids need support, not to be up against a friggin’ wall!” Mister Price shouts.

The sergeant says something in a hushed tone and Mister Price shakes his head and brushes his hair out of his face. He’s wearing a sweater vest over a white shirt and khaki pants.

“Then search them! Get it over with,” he says eventually, holding his head in his hands now. Distraught. “These kids are in shock, don’t you people realize that?”

“Pieces!” Jessie shrieks. She catches me off guard and I step back.

“The wall please,” another SWAT officer says, waving me back. Jessie’s crying but it’s not a normal cry, its cadence is off, like her wiring isn’t working right anymore. I can hear notes in her voice that shouldn’t be

there, like a drunk trying to play the piano. But I wouldn't know if I were just reading Jessie wrong, anyway. I'm not like any of them. I've been raised by an angry old man, I read poetry, I don't have "socials," and because I don't like people and I don't like my brain rotting so corporate 'merica can rip me off for a dime every chance those pricks get, I am an outcast.

"Shut up, Jessie," I mumble.

She looks at me and lets out one really, really loud laugh, like a foghorn blowing directly into my face. Even the sergeant turns to see this. Jessie gasps for air. Her face has turned red. For the first time I notice there's blood on her shirt and something yellowish. It looks like mucus but maybe it's something else, from someone else. A blue vein bulges on the side of Jessie's head.

"Hey Jessie, take it easy. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

She gasps. Then she lets out another foghorn blast, even louder than before. This time I can smell sick. She leans forward and pukes on my shoes, kneels down in her sick and collapses as I stand over her watching. The sergeant is shouting something, people are running, but I

just stand there and stare, like she's some kind of grotesque science experiment. Like I'm looking at her in a giant petri dish. For a brief second I wonder if she'll ever be the same again.

We're moved to a second line now. They're checking bags. I'm standing beside Jackson Philips, the captain of the football team. He's shaking, I can see sweat along the edge of his dark brow. His eyes are darting back and forth.

"Hey man," he says, looking at me. "I don't like being surrounded by this many cops. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," I shrug. "But you're OK."

"My dad's a portfolio manager, he went to Harvard. But white people start getting shot and black folks start lookin' suspicious. Next thing I'm downtown and what'd'ya know? There's gunshot residue or some such thing that was never there on my hands. Case closed."

"It's not going to be like that."

"Yeah, how do you know?"

"Because the shooter's in there and he's dead."

Jackson leans forward. "You saw?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "And I know who it is."

“Who?”

I explain how I was in the closet when I heard the thud, and how when they opened the closet door it was Todd on the floor.

“Todd...” he’s trying to comprehend. “I just covered my face and got the fuck outta there, it was bad.”

“Yeah, just screaming, crying.”

“Bro... didn’t you and Todd.”

I look at him.

“Wasn’t he the guy that...”

“Yeah. He’s the guy that did it.”

Jackson leans closer. “Bro, why didn’t he smoke you? I thought you guys hated each other?”

“I was in the closet. I guess he didn’t know I was there and he just smoked himself,” I whispered.

“Damn,” Jackson sighs. “He even did some of the ninth graders. I saw some of them on the floor...” His face starts to tremble. I can see a tear running from the edge of his eye, down over his cheek. “Why, man? Why?”

“Come over here please,” the sergeant interrupts in a tired voice.

Mister Price is with Jessie now, his arm is around her as she sobs. I can see men and women in white lab coats filtering into the school.

Todd's legacy was complete. It was as if the world had been turned sideways and we had all been scattered across the floor. Only some of us had been able to stand afterwards. Now Todd would be vilified by media around the world. It would be his memory that was forever tarnished by the blood of kids just trying to survive high school. He deserved everything he got.

We move to a second line. A state trooper stands by a table. "Empty your pockets. What's in the bag?"

"No guns."

He looks up at me and shakes his head. "We've all had enough of guns for one day. You're the only kid here still with a bag."

"I forgot I had it."

He unzips the bag, looks in and then stares at me as he takes out the notebook, rope and roll of hundred dollar bills. There's fourteen-hundred dollars to be exact. "Care to explain?" he asks. I feel goosebumps.

“It’s for my grandfather’s boat. We were meant to go fishing this afternoon.”

He nods. “Off Jackson Bay?”

“Yeah,” I nod.

“I like it out there. And the money?”

“I was going to buy a new console after school, for my birthday.”

He looks down at the bag and his face relaxes. “Gotta be careful carrying this much cash, Son.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He tosses the rope, notebook and the cash back in the bag and hands it to me. “You have family to pick you up?”

“They’re on the way,” I lie.

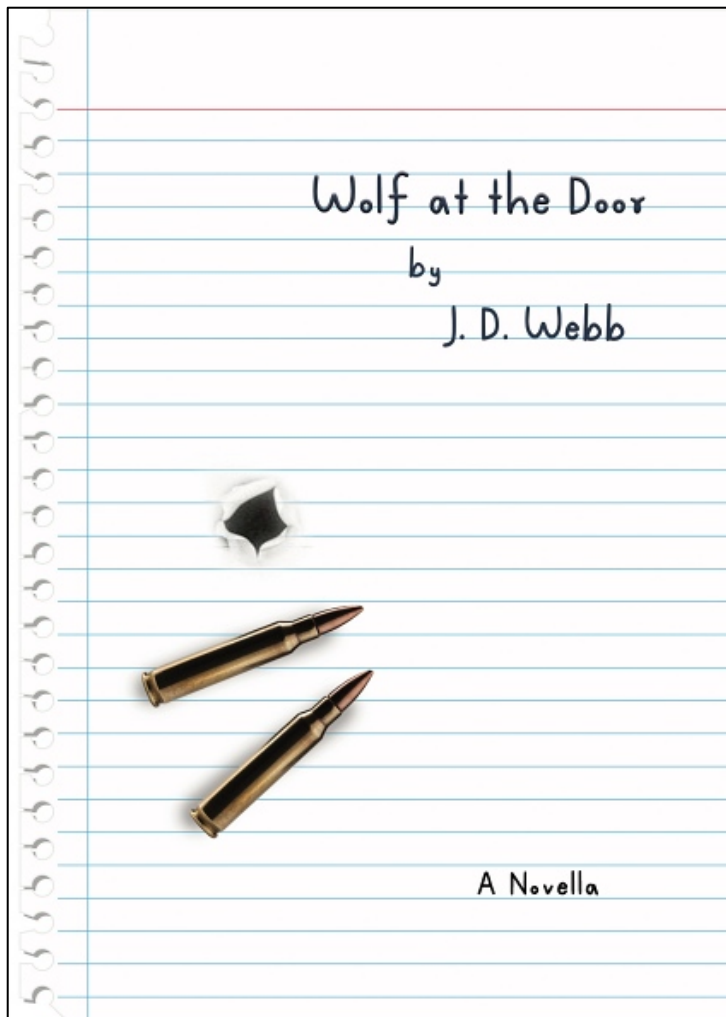
He nods and waves me on. Freedom. I feel a flash of exhilaration as I walk away. There are reporters talking into cameras all around me. Some try to ask me questions, but I just walk past them as if they’re not even there. Part of me says just keep looking forward, don’t look back. But I can’t help it, there’s too much going on. I turn one last time, as if to say goodbye to all of them. There’s a drizzle in the air now. I don’t notice at first, but off to the

side the cop in the trench coat is staring at me. The whole experience has been so surreal it feels like he's just in my head, like I'm just imagining him frozen in time as helicopters pass overhead. But I'm not imagining. He's looking straight at me. I turn and walk faster.

Parents are hugging the kids that made it and crying with each new reunion. There is no reunion for me. My grandfather will be at home napping. At four he'll tune in to his favorite right-wing news broadcast and see what another maniac did to abuse his constitutional rights. This time right in his backyard. He'll call me to see if I'm OK. Maybe. Then he'll rant to himself about how guns don't kill people, people kill people, and isn't it terrible how snowflakes just want to take every law-abiding citizen's rights away.

I cut through the school buses that are now parked along the road outside Shermont and walk to the bike rack. The lock is cold, wet from the drizzle, my hand is shaking as I hear the click of the lock. I let the chain fall to the ground. I don't need the lock anymore. It's time to peddle to the station. Something I've been dreading all day.

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