

Eric Seiley

Warnings We Do Not Heed

September 20, 2026

1, 853 Words

Every Child Has a Game

The rules seemed simple enough, do not answer on the single knock. Just one knock and you froze. And didn't answer back.

Strange game, Mara thought. I don't remember ever playing that as a child. Wonder where they learned it from? Mara watched the dozen or so boys and girls playing the strange little game around the big oak tree in the middle of the town square. Curious to see why they were so intent on it.

It went like this: All the children ran around the tree, hooting and hollering, nudging each other, till one child suddenly peeled off, ran up to the tree and knocked on the trunk three times. Only then did they all stop and call out, "Who's there?" "Why, it is I, Charles!" came the child's response. Then all the children laughed and started running around the tree again. Till another child broke off, ran up to the tree and, this time, knocked two times. All the children froze and yelled, "Who's there?" Waiting for the inevitable response. "Why it is I, Annie!" To which they'd laugh and start running again. But when the last child ran up and knocked on the tree one time, everyone froze, but no one answered. No one called out "*Who's there?*" or "*It is I*" or made any sound whatsoever. They all stayed silent and still.

When it first happened, Mara was a bit confused. A child knocked once and everyone stopped? And no one answered? Why? Her answer seemed to come a moment later when, a small boy -- far too young to be out this late -- heard the one knock and started to answer. Only his sister quickly put her hand over his mouth and

whispered fiercely, "You're not supposed to answer that one!" Another girl nearby whispered for them to shut up.

Why?

No one moved after the single knock for quite for some time -- till the child who'd knocked once yelled, "Aww nuts" and sprinted away. Mara assumed he was running home, but didn't understand what he'd done to be out of the game.

Apparently, he was though and left. Then all the other children came unglued and started running around the tree again. Laughing and repeating the whole sequence of knocks till the last child, the one who would knock only once, froze and waited for a reply. When none came, that child too sprinted away, reducing their number by one. Each time. Every one knock round. Till the game started all over again. This went on for a bit.

Strange game, Mara thought. Why knock one time and not answer? And what happens when it's down to the last child alone?

Mara spoke up, causing several to jump in fright at the sudden interruption. "What happens if someone answers on the single knock?"

The children glanced nervously at each other, and the girl with the too young brother answered, "Well, if you answer, then it knows you're here."

"Okay. So?"

"If you answer, it'll come for you."

"And if it comes?"

"Then it'll get you. Duh!"

"And if you don't answer?"

"Then whoever knocked has to run home and lock their doors and stay quiet for the rest of the night so it can't find out where they live. No talking loud or anything. Not even if your Mom and Dad get mad at you. You can whisper though, but its better if you don't. It can still hear you and might come and get you."

"Oh, I see." But she didn't. It was a strange game. For some reason, she wanted to see what happened when the last child was alone. Would he or she knock, or just run home? She felt some anxiety for that child, like they'd somehow be targeted, all alone, and never see tomorrow.

Mara, you're being silly, she thought, *worrying over some odd children's game.* So she picked up her grocery sack and headed home herself. But during the walk, she felt a strange anxiety. Not for herself, but for the children. The young girl's explanation had truly given her a creepy, 'children of the corn' unease in her bones. Sure, they were kids. And kids were kids after all. But that game felt all kinds of wrong.

Who would teach them such a thing? she wondered.

When Mara returned home, just as the sky was darkening, she went in and called out for her mother, who was probably resting in her room. "Mom, I'm home. And guess what? You won't believe the strange game I just watched a bunch of kids playing." She headed to the kitchen with her bag of groceries to get dinner started. "Mom, are you up? Do you still have a headache? I bought some aspirin at the store like you asked."

Mara was about to go check on her when someone knocked on the door three times – bang bang bang.

"Hello?" Mara called out, heading for the door before realizing the irony, "Who's there?"

"It's Barbara, your neighbor," came the reply.

Mara opened the door to a very upset neighbor holding several uprooted plants in one hand and the leash to her dog, Jasper, in the other. "He's at it again! I came home this afternoon to find half my winter garden uprooted. That dog of yours has gone and dug up all my collard greens and most of the arugula and swiss chard."

"Oh no, Mrs. Canfield, I'm so sorry! I was sure I tied Jasper up securely this morning before I left for work. I'm so sorry. He must've broken out. I'll make it up to you best I can."

"Well, see that you do. I don't want to be that neighbor, but this is the third time this has happened. If it happens again, I'll have no choice but to call the SPCA and have that dog taken away."

"Yes, Mrs. Canfield, I understand. You've been very patient," Mara replied taking back the broken leash. "I won't let it happen again."

Mara closed the door, heading back inside to look for Jasper when someone knocked on the front door, twice this time. *Knock-knock*. "What the...?" Mara turned around, surprised. Calling out, "Hello? Who's there? Mrs. Canfield? Did you forget something?"

"No it's me, Mrs. Raintree. Elliot from two doors down. I have your dog here."

"Oh," Mara replied, walking quickly to the door and opening it.

"Here you go, Mrs. Raintree. Here's your dog. I found him in our back yard, like, whining and looking all lost and stuff. Like he didn't know which way was home."

"Well, thank you for returning him to me, Elliot. That was very kind of you."

"It's weird though, you know. He's a dog and all. But he's the only dog I know who can't find his way home. I thought all dogs had, like, a homing beacon or some such thing in their head so they never got lost."

"You bring up an interesting point. Well, thank you again, Elliot, for returning Jasper. It was very kind of you."

"No problem, Mrs. Raintree."

After Elliot left, Mara took Jasper into the garage and leashed him tight, making sure he couldn't get out. Then she returned to the kitchen to start dinner.

"Mom? You up yet?" Mara called. She was about to walk to her mother's room, but then someone knocked on the door. One time. Only one time. Just a single knock. *Bang.*

Who knocks only once? Mara wondered, sending a chill down her spine. She wasn't superstitious by any means, but hearing a single knock, so similar to the game she'd watched the children playing, gave her pause. *Is someone playing a game with me? Did one of those children follow me home? No, that's impossible. That would be absurd.* Still Mara couldn't help herself -- she froze in place and didn't answer the knock. Letting the silence extend itself and a feeling of dread grow. Until...

"Is someone at the door, dear? Didn't I just hear someone knock," Mara's mother, Iris, asked, from behind Mara. Mara startled and screamed. "Oh my, Mara! Are you okay, dear? Sorry if I frightened you. Why are you so jumpy?"

"I..." Mara whispered. "We shouldn't..."

"Why are you whispering, dear?" Iris walked to the front door. "Let's not keep whoever it is waiting."

"NO! Don't open the DOOR!" She couldn't help it. She was scared.

Startled, Iris replied, "Why, *Mara Jane Raintree!* Whatever has gotten into you?" She opened the door, staring back at her daughter as Mara hid her face in her hands. "You're behaving very strangely."

When Iris turned to the open door, no one was there. Just an Amazon package sitting on the welcome mat. "Oh look, dear," Iris smiled, picking up the package, "the book I ordered is here. And it only took a day. Isn't that amazing?! Why, when I was a kid, such things took weeks, even months sometimes, if you ordered them through the mail. Now, with a click of a button, they come in less than a day. Don't you think that's..."

Mara was ghost white and staring out the door. Shaking.

"Mara, are you okay? Oh my but you do look very pale, and you're sweating. Are you feeling sick? Here let me check." Iris walked over to Mara and put her hand to her forehead. "Well, you aren't warm, but you're forehead feels clammy. Maybe you had something bad to eat at lunch? Why don't you go lie down on the couch and I'll make some chicken soup for you. You used to get sick a lot as a child and chicken soup always made you feel better. Remember?"

Mara didn't answer. Just stared at the open door.

"You know," Iris continued, closing the door, "chicken soup goes way back. Way back to the ancient times I suppose. Probably back to the first child who ever got sick and needed comfort. Of course, they also used to sacrifice children in the ancient days. Even here in Milford. In the town square where that giant oak stands now. Terrible! So I suppose the old ways aren't always the best. Thank goodness," Iris considered looking at the book package in her hands, "we get to live in modern times. They do shine bright, don't they? I suppose, in the end, you just have to decide which is best to follow, the old ways or the new."

Iris led Mara to the couch and had her lie down. Then left for the kitchen to make chicken soup.

Mara stared at the front door. Her unease dreadful. *Maybe if I'm quiet, he won't find me. He won't come and get me. I don't want him to come and get me! And maybe, she chastised herself, you should stop being foolish, stand up and go help your mother in the kitchen! You aren't a child anymore.*

Mara stood up and headed for the kitchen, fighting back her dread. Looking to the door like something, or someone, was still waiting for her to answer.

The End.

