The Girl Behind the Door
by John Brooks
Reviewed by: William Feigelman, Ph.D.

The annals of suicide survivor loss memoirs do not include many written by men, which provides an additional incentive for seeking out this especially well written book by John Brooks, entitled The Girl Behind the Door (NY: Scribner, 2016). Here, first-time author Brooks courageously bares his soul, following the heavily treaded path many suicide bereaved parents take after a child’s suicide, trying to understand why their lost loved one died this way, and attempting to understand what might have been done or should have been done to avert this tragedy. This is an essential bereavement task for all survivors whether they go to the extreme point that Brooks did, to write a book about it.

The title of Brooks’ book is a particularly apt one, referring to the gulf between parents and teenage children as they stand on opposite sides of the door, with adolescent children eager to keep parents out of their personal and private space, and parents eager to peer behind these barriers to learn whether their child is safe and free from harm. Many a child’s bedroom door has been slammed shut in a fit of adolescent rage, or battered when a parent wanted entry and was denied it by the child. Many a home may have replaced or repaired a child’s battered bedroom door, or taken the door off altogether at times, when the child appeared to be acting in a totally untrustworthy fashion. In the Brooks family the bedroom door signified the great communication gulf between parents and daughter Casey, who rarely ate meals with her parents and rarely shared her intimate thoughts with parents, though they desperately tried to reach Casey on innumerable occasions and levels.

John Brooks offers a thorough and compelling portrait of his family’s life from its early days of acquiring daughter Casey, detailing her adoption at 14 months of age from an orphanage in rural Poland. The married couple John and wife Erika encountered many of the same difficulties many transnational adoptive parents experience, navigating foreign bureaucracies which was aided by Erica’s Polish fluency. Initially, Casey’s developmental delays barely permitted the parents to leave Poland with their newly adopted daughter. In the years that followed Casey appeared to close all developmental gaps and became a precocious young girl. Yet, as Casey grew older it became clear to parents that Casey could be altogether unreasonable, subject to tantrums and meltdowns, with fits of incessant crying and screaming. Casey’s resistance to parental authority initially led parents to insist that she see a therapist which led to a progression of different counselors seen with few beneficial results. Parents went through a variety of crises with Casey first over her resistance to parental authority, then over her failing grades and sub-par school work, later over bulimic and cutting behavior and in the last years of her life, drug and alcohol use. In each case, Casey rarely confided or bonded with counselors and sought to withdraw at the first possible opportunity. One counselor, who Casey saw for a relatively long period of time mentioned that Casey could be suffering from an attachment disorder, but the counselor never appeared to follow up with this in her treatment of Casey.

After Casey died parents gained access to her dark and self-reproachful writings both on her
computer and on the web, learning that her depressive thinking had a long history behind it. All this may sound dreadfully familiar to other survivors: many learning after the death of the suicidal person’s skillfulness in being able to successfully hide their suicide risk. Readers will find much value in thoughtful and well written book.