

The Door

Harold stood at the door. He had heard of such things, but never believed the stories were true. Solitary doors, framed but no walls. Nothing behind them. Yet they open to somewhere else. He looked up at the elaborate scroll work, wondering at the door's age. He walked around to the back and stopped.

What happens if I open it from this side? He tested the handle. It might have been welded in place, so rigid was its response. Harold kicked at the dirt by its base. His foot caught, nearly tripping him. *Ow.* He flexed his toes, shaking off the impact. *What is it doing here in the glade? People have been crossing this area for ever. Did it just appear?*

He walked back around to the front. A fallen oak leaf drifted by, then swirled around the door. Harold looked left and right, but could feel no wind. He stuck out his hand in front of him, to within a foot of the door. The air was cold. He shivered, but not from the temperature.

I have no interest in going through that door. I'm not that gullible, I'm almost a teenager. Besides, it is nearly supper time.

He was turning to walk away when a thought struck him. What if something comes through it this way? Fear gripped him. In the stories the doors served a purpose. None were ever decorative. And they always selected one person each. One door, one person to open it.

Harold swallowed hard.

Wait a minute – I am not bound to anything just because some old stories say so. I can choose my own path. He turned and began walking home. After a few steps he heard a scraping sound. He froze, then turned to look behind him. The door sat the same distance away, as though he had not moved. He took another step. Scrape.

Harold took off at a full run. He vaulted fences, shot through hedge rows and between close trees. Behind him came the most awful noises as the door fought to maintain its distance. He pressed on, climbing through a keyhole in a stone wall, followed by a long crawl under some brambles.

Scrape. Crash. Drag. Snap.

Harold spun around in time to see the door skid to a halt.

"Ha! Caught you in the act!" Harold paused. He was not sure what that helped, but it seemed important to assert himself. He had heard father say that to his older sister. He tacked on "Stop following me!" for good measure.

The door sat motionless, a path of broken limbs and furrowed earth behind it. Harold walked around the door and kicked a stone it had displaced, giving him an idea. He returned to his position at the front of the door and resumed walking. He led the way back to his family's small farm. The pair proceeded to the back pasture, whereupon Harold started walking in a curious pattern, with a mischievous grin on his face.

Harold's father Cyrus had tasked him with tilling the sheep field, a laborious undertaking even for an adult. It was all the more so for a twelve year old, earning it the title of 'stinkery job' in his book. The rocky field had resisted all manner of tools, plows, and anything else he could muster. Until now.

The door made an insufferable racket, but moved through the stony ground with ease, leaving smooth soil behind. Twenty minutes later Harold stopped to inspect his work. He could not believe his eyes – the entire pasture was perfect.

Well that's my Saturday back. I can go to the market and see if Madeline is selling jam. He turned towards the house, then froze. *How can I go inside? This thing will wreck the house!*

Dejected, he walked the door through a pile of manure by the barn and stopped. At this point the door had enough. It shook in a manner that reminded Harold of grandpa when he was in a rage. A curious squawking came from the barn door a few feet away. Harold took a few steps and peered cautiously inside. He knew the barn was empty, so he feared a thief. Instead, he heard the old radio on the tool bench screeching for attention. He adjusted the dial a few ticks, then a voice came through loud and clear.

"Now see here young man!" Harold looked at the door. He got the impression it was wagging a finger at him. "Your behavior is most inappropriate. I am a gatekeeper of the highest order. I shall not be treated as such!"

"Go away." He had considered several responses, but decided to start with a simple, direct message. Set expectations.

"What? One does not give instructions to my kind. It is simply not done."

Harold considered this. *I can't give orders, yet I got it to till my field.* He moved slightly, causing the door to shift its place in the manure. He looked at the base of the door. Point made.

The door shook with more fury than before. If it had hands, Harold was certain they would be clenched into fists and shaken about.

"Remove me from this substance at once!"

"Or?"

The door opened a few inches explosively, then slammed shut, launching a few clumps of manure at Harold. He ducked, avoiding the one aimed at his head, but caught another full in the chest.

Splat.

Harold looked down at his shirt in disgust. He sighed, then walked backwards a few feet, clearing the door of the manure pile.

"No." He put that out there, as a pre-emptive measure. He could not afford to let it run roughshod over him.

"Unacceptable. One must under-"

"NO! I don't care what you want. I'm not doing it."

Harold was certain he saw it sigh, but could not for the life of him figure out how. It seemed to expand and contract slightly.

"Most irregular. The council will be displeased with this turn of events."

"Well, I'm displeased with you following me. It is almost dinnertime. I can't drag you into the dining room. Go away."

"You voiced no objection when gallivanting through your pastures with me in tow. You cannot have it both ways."

"I'd prefer to have it the normal way, with you not here. If you didn't like furrowing the field, that is your problem. You could have simply stopped any time."

"No. I. Could. NOT!"

Harold sensed a seething energy behind those words. *Uh-oh. He seems really mad now. But then again, so what? I don't owe him anything.*

"Wait, don't tell me. You are honor-bound to see through the recruitment of your charge, or some such language."

The door fidgeted, and discreetly looked at its feet. Or where they would be.

"I politely decline. Thank you for your service, but I now release you seek another." He knew this was a long shot, and watched keenly for the reaction.

"That is not how it is done."

"Do it differently. See, I've read the stories about doors like you. If I go through to somewhere else, I'll be stuck there for ages until some dumb quest is done, or whatever. I have a birthday coming up this weekend, and I have already waited ages to be a teenager. I'm not going through."

"You must. It is the way of things."

Harold got so mad he bunched up his fists and stomped his feet. He felt he would boil over. He grabbed two handfuls of rocks from the ground and hurled them at the door. Flecks of paint chipped off where they struck. Harold threw another, but the door opened, allowing the rocks to pass through, then closed again.

During the moment the door was open Harold saw golden sunlight and heard birds singing. He felt drawn to it, then caught himself.

"Oooh! You're trying to trick me! You wait til dad finds out!"

Harold turned and stormed the remaining steps to the house. He opened the back door, and as he crossed the threshold he heard a popping sound. He turned to look. The door was gone.

Oh thank God. Wait. Did I imagine it?

He gingerly stepped back across the threshold.

Pop.

The door returned. Harold put his face in his hands.

"This is for the looney bin. Let me guess. My friends won't see you either. What about your scraping path? Will anyone see that?"

"That is not for me to say."

"Playing it coy, eh?" Harold jumped back and forth across the threshold a half-dozen times. Pop pop pop pop pop pop.

"Stop that!"

Harold fell over laughing on the back porch.

"Ha! Gotcha."

"Harold! It's supper time. Who are you talking to?" His father asked from the kitchen.

"Oh just calling to a Robin." He shot the door a sideways glance and went inside. Pop.

That night Harold dreamed of doors, portals, and stories of mystical lands far away. The adventures in the dreams were pleasant enough, but they felt a little too connected. He knew it was natural to dream about recent events, but these felt altered. Like a marketing pitch - 'Come visit distant lands! Be a Hero.'

At first light he kept his eyes shut for a bit, to put off facing it. After five minutes the anticipation was unbearable. He crept out of bed, then a tuft of messy brown hair rose above the window sill, followed by two wide eyes.

No door out there. What about the scuff marks it left? He looked right, towards the barn path, and his heart skipped a beat. *Oh no! Dad's walking right towards it!*

Cyrus walked right over the rubble-strewn trail, completely unaware. Harold noticed that the scrapes are less noticeable now. They are starting to blend, somehow. He sighed, deflated. It was real, and it will be waiting for him again. He dug out an old portable radio and found some fresh batteries, and dropped it into his backpack. He wandered out for breakfast, eyes not focused on anything.

"Are you Ok?" His mom asked, peering at him over the counter.

"Yeah. Just distracted."

"Thinking ahead to your birthday again? Don't let it interfere with your studies."

"Don't worry. All my homework is done." He glanced up. "I'll be a teenager by then. Dad will teach me to drive the tractor. And I can call on a girl for a picnic."

"I know. I'm not sure which worries me more. Either one is enough to turn my hair grey."

"Mom--"

"Don't say it," she cut him off as she smoothed some less-than-black hairs.

Harold exited via the back door, in full view of Cyrus. He felt the now-familiar pop, but could not see anything.

"I know you're out there."

"What's that?" Cyrus answered back.

"Oh, nothing. Just muttering to myself."

"A bit young for that aren't you? If you start dribbling I'll have to send you to the home with gran."

Harold walked in a meandering shuffle, feigning a hunch and the use of a cane, cackling. Cyrus laughed so hard that it echoed off the barn. Harold was pretty sure it qualified as a guffaw.

"When did you have time for the sheep pasture? It looks great."

"Uh, yeah. Not sure why it went faster this time. Ok, gotta get to school."

Harold shouldered his pack and started walking. Once around the corner the scrape joined him.

"Coming to school with me, are you?" He called over his shoulder while pulling out the radio.

The door managed to grumble. Harold tuned in to the same spot on the dial.

"Do you have a name? I'm Harold."

"I know who you are. As for me, ahem." The door gave the distinct impression it was standing up to its full height and straightening its tie. If it had one. "I am known as The Portal of Questionable Outcomes."

Harold considered this for a few paces. He slowed to walk side-by-side with the door.

"Not really selling me on the whole 'going through' bit with that. Do you have a regular name?"

"This entire affair is highly irregular," the door said while portraying an eye roll.

"And it is not going to get any more so. Out with it."

"Percival."

"Pleased to meet you, Percival. Did you do something special to earn the long name?" Harold peered at Percival with genuine interest.

"Ehm. I seem to, ah, be given many of the more challenging tasks," he replied while glancing away, which is a neat trick without eyes.

"Sooo, if I go through, there is a good chance I never return."

The door emanated guilt. Harold suddenly felt bad for it.

"Do you like your job?"

"Oh, you know. Three squares and a cot. Can't complain."

The reply rang hollow. Harold got the impression he had broached a subject that Percival was not allowed to discuss. He decided to change his tack, and followed a hunch.

"How does time work for you?"

"Beg pardon?"

"If I go through, and take years to finish my quest, when I return here only seconds will have passed. Is that right?"

"Yes, for the most part."

"So how does it work for you? You come here, spend some time, then you return. Upon your arrival, have only seconds passed back there, wherever you call home?"

Percival became very uncomfortable.

"Oh. Is it not really a home?"

"More of a dispatch."

"Would you like a home? At least for a while?" Harold stopped to face him.

Percival froze utterly. After nearly a minute of silence he spoke again.

"You would offer this to me?"

"Sure. You could join us on the farm. We have a tool shed, the barn, and a few other covered areas. I don't know if it would be safe for you to be in our house. Wouldn't want a guest to mistake you for the wash room."

"Yes, that would be awkward."

"Would that work, staying outside? Do you get cold?"

"Some."

"Hmm. We could figure out some way to keep you with the family."

"I, I'm not sure. Oh, I'm being foolish. This cannot be."

"Would you get in trouble for staying here for decades?"

"There is no precedent for this. None that I am aware of, at any rate."

"Could you reveal yourself to my folks? It would make things easier. Then we could tip you sideways and bring you inside."

"I, ehm. Oh." Pop.

Two other students came into view, heading for the same path as Harold.

"Who were you talking to?" One asked with a confused look.

"Oh, just rehearsing something for a class. I don't like speaking in front of groups. I have to practice."

"Already talking to himself," the other said with mock worry. "A bad sign."

You don't know the half of it.

Pop.

Harold had been waiting for the curious sound and its miniscule pressure wave as he walked the same path home.

"Where do you go when you disappear? Are you still around here, or back to dispatch?"

"Here. Oh golly, yes here. Not dispatch," Percival said a little too eagerly.

"Have you considered my offer?"

"All day."

"And?"

"I fear I would risk being decommissioned were I discovered. And I feel certain I would be."

"Would one short lifespan be worth the risk? If you could live it more fully? Listen to the birds, smell the flowers. Talk to friends."

Percival made a stuttering sound, followed by a sharp inhale.

"I could be one of your friends."

Percival's defenses melted at this show of kindness. Perhaps this young lad's selfless quest was meant to occur this side of the door.

"Oh dear. That would be lovely. Even if they split me for kindling upon my return, it shall have been worth it."

"Here's another thought. Don't go back."

Harold put his hand on what he hoped was a shoulder. Percival leaned into him a little, and conveyed a smile.



The End