



Contents

1.	The Door at the End of the Path	9
2.	Conditions	18
3.	The Eternal In-Between	30
4.	The Mannequin	36
5.	Brianna	41
6.	Noticing	50
7.	Entanglement	71
8.	The Day Before Tomorrow	74
9.	It's Already Too Late	84
10.	The Shivering Ground	87
11.	A Universe Akilter	105



The Door at the End of the Path

The door had been there ever since Shelley could remember. In the back of the walled garden, the path leading through brambles to come upon it, suddenly—first sunflowers in tilted rows, the tumble of stones and dirt turned over, spiderwebs strewn with dew; then, behind the brambles, past the pachysandra and ferns, up it came: the wall, and the doorway in red crumbling brick, and ivy. It had no keyhole, as a door should; nothing to peek through and wonder about: it had no knob at all—indeed, if it were not for the fact that it was, very clearly, a door; set within a frame, still with its weathered wood, splintered and greyed by years, it would not have seemed very much like a door at all. There was no indentation; no marks where a handle might once have been, and Shelley had spent long enough pulling her hands along the grasses by the wall's end, poking amidst the dirt with sticks and pointed rocks. She would have found a handle, if it had fallen off or been thrown there; the way she had found the pottery, the broken bottles of glass, blue and green and brown, and put them in a pile in the old stone bird-feeder that was never filled with anything but a thin skim of muddy water and, in the autumn, a drift of leaves. Sometimes, she would lean her head very close to the ground as though maybe she could peer *under* the door, but it was flush with the brick, and the scree of dirt across it was never disturbed by as much as a runnel of water coming through.

So impenetrable was this door that it became the indefatiga-

ble imaginative resource: anything could be behind it, and sometimes was. On peaceful, sunny afternoons, she could hear the hooves of horses going by, and imagine lords and ladies dressed in their fine clothes as though in a mediaeval Romance; on grey, sullen days the washing on the line flapped as women bustled quickly out, glancing toward the sky, putting everything into baskets as fast as they could before those first, cold, unforgiving drops of rain.

Shelley had tapped on the door, too, and sometimes in the winter when the snowdrifts fell with great shuddering crackles, she could almost fancy that another little girl, quite like her, tapped back from the other side.

No one else saw the purpose of the door; for they did not venture so far into the wilds of the back garden, near the wall, in the corners. Perhaps, in truth, the most mundane possible explanations existed: but even those had their thrill. Another house, near their own, had once wanted a doorway from yard to yard, but after a feud had sawn off the handles; an artist with a flair for the mysterious had commissioned a false door to be built just for the occasion, never intending it to be opened at all.

In the mornings Shelley had her tutors and in the afternoons she played, but in the evening she sat with her family in the long, crooked dining room on the ground floor. It was a most peculiar room, and I am sure that most people would agree not a singularly pleasant one. For, long ago, it had been a hallway connecting the kitchen to other rooms in the house; and when the other walls had been knocked aside to create a photography studio of the rest of the floor, the hallway had been neglected: and so it was that it became a dining room.

The great wooden table fairly scraped the walls on either

side, and to climb onto the small chairs with their seats that smelled like old fabric Shelley had to duck under the table and shimmy up on the other side: while her mother sat on one end, where the door to the photography studio was; and her father on the other, where lay the door to the kitchen and the front hall and the stairwell. And on each of the walls, which were papered with the most peculiar old paper in innumerable zebraesque stripes, were the photographs her mother took.

It was art, and many people paid highly for it, and sometimes if Shelley was very good and very quiet she could stand in the corners of the room and watch the lights being positioned and the sets propped up and the customers with their tall buttoned coats. But though there was always an air of mysterious business in the studio itself, the photographs were strange things, and certainly did not help the atmosphere of mashed peas.

Lying at odd angles amid pools of blackness were the skins of animals with staring eyes, and upon it in varying states ranging from fancy dress to artfully-placed sheets were the figures, which sat or contorted themselves with the oddest countenances, as though they were being statues. Some, in fact, looked almost lifeless; and one particular young woman, with long, winding hair, lay on what seemed to be the side of a cliff-fall with her hair about her neck. In monochrome it looked strangely like blood, or a rope; her palms, opened below her, were like pieces that had been cut off, coming from the bones of animals in a huge and solemn pile on either side.

“Did your studies go well today?” Mother would ask, and Shelley would tell her about Geography and History and the maps she had traced with her fingers, wondering about that so-vast world beyond, and the ships and engines that could take one

there.

“Did you find anything new in the garden?” Father would ask, and Shelley would tell him about the new species of butterfly that had alighted on the milkweed, or the precise route of the ants from their sandy home near where the hose connected to the wall with a spinning wheel like a pirate’s ship.

Neither of them asked about the door in the wall, and if Shelley mentioned it, and what had been happening beyond it that day, they would say, “That’s very nice, dear,” and that would be all.

When the plates had been cleared off Shelley would be sent up to her room again, and would read, or play with the strange carven animals her mother had made. But they looked very much like the photographs, and so when Shelley was done playing she would put them back in their shelves, facing the walls, so that nothing could look at her when she slept: and a very sensible precaution she thought it was, too.

Now there was one particular model who came to the house on occasion, and he had a false eye which he’d chosen to get in a different color, to be more inspiring: it was like a lion’s eye, and he would sometimes take it out to scare Shelley. But Shelley, who found it much less intimidating than the pictures in the hall, would only nod politely and agree that it was indeed a ghastly sight.

This particular model never was as brusque or as harried as the others, and did not carry a watch. “What time is it, dear lady,” he would always ask Mother, who would know quite off the top of her head; and when he went to be posed they always spent some time walking this way and that before the lights were adjusted, with Mother showing him just how he ought to look this

time, and tilting his face as she pleased, while his one real eye watched her, and his cane, which he had put down by the door, watched Shelley with its bird-shaped head.

Funny thing, isn't it? The bird-head might ask occasionally. *No one else seems to need so many pictures taken as that man.*

Oh, well, Shelley might reply, *I'm sure he must be famous and rich; and he is obviously quite vain of his appearance—though it is a bit grotesque when he takes out his eye.*

But the bird-head always cackled at Shelley's careful answers, as though it knew something that she had not said, and that *it* would never say. And Shelley would give it a terrible glare, and, if it persisted in its sly expression, would hood it with the piece of cloth used to stop up reflections.

Father, of course, went out to work; and in the morning he was always very busy. Sometimes, after breakfast, Shelley would watch him run about fifteen times from his room to the wash-room and back again, as he found things he had forgotten and added other papers to his ever-growing stack. Father's work, Shelley found, was much harder to understand than Mother's. All she knew was that it encompassed Figures, and that many people were always making Predictions. She wondered how it was that though anyone could make Predictions, and they could even be accurate Predictions, the only ones paid for it were those who had framed pieces of paper to account for it.

"Have a good day, seashell," he would say before he left, while Shelley held his hat and peered out onto the street, which was always filled with dust and unaccountably loud as soon as Father opened the door. Then, taking his hat and shoving it onto his head, he would rush out into the mass of busy people and all at once look nothing at all like Father anymore: in fact, if it were

not for the particular way his hat had been squished ever since one of her wooden animals sat on it, Shelley would hardly have been able to tell his brown-coated figure from anyone else's.

One afternoon, when Shelley had just finished her walk around the garden, nodding, at last, to the door in the wall and pressing her fingers against the wood, tugging on vines, she came in to find that the kitchen door was blocked by buckets and booted feet, and recalled that there had been something with pipes that needed fixing. She was quite shy of the workmen, and so instead of walking through the kitchen she sneaked around the house to the side door. Taking off her muddy boots outside she slipped into the photography studio, muffling the bell on the door with one hand so as not to cause an interruption.

Shelley could tell right away from the bird-head cane by the door that the famous gentleman must be about, and she walked ever so quiet past the strange, unfathomable shapes of stands and things that cluttered up the corners of the large room. The empty, tattered wood floor beneath her was very soft and helped her along without creaking a bit. On the other side of the room was the door to the hallway, and once she got there, she could open it a crack and be up to her room to change into something appropriate for evening wear.

The lights were pointed inward toward the modeling space, and a grand table was set up covered in fine foods, as in some of Mother's Greek themes. The man with the glass eye was holding a bunch of grapes in his hand, and Shelley thought to herself that it didn't look at all like the right prop for him: they were so round and dark and fragile they made him seem quite intimidating and piratical; while with something else he might have come across as full of mournful hauteur. He picked one of the grapes

between his fingers, which caught the bright lights like a bloody circle, and held it out to Mother, who leaned forward with her teeth and bit down right in the middle. It popped, and the juice went flying; and Shelley felt something that was neither revulsion nor dismay, but quite so overpowering that she felt all of a sudden overcome with the need to hide. But at that moment, as though springing out in answer, the trembling rack of false swords by her hand caught her finger and fell with a deafening clatter to the floor.

Mother and the famous gentleman sprang up as though startled, and Mother called out, carefully, “Shelley... dear? Is that you?”

But Shelley had found a very smart place to hide; in a false-coffin, and when Mother and the man with the false eye went tromping past, they saw only the pile of swords lying on the ground.

“Hmm,” Mother said, and that was all; then she bent to place them all back.

It was late when Shelley made it to the dining room that day, and when she looked down the hall to Mother and Father, the photographs seemed especially strange: for one, in the corner, was tilted as though it were about to jump!

“Mother,” Shelley said, when she had talked about her studies and the wonders of the garden, “why do you never put pictures of the man with the glass eye on the wall with the rest?”

There was a silence that seemed, if anything, vaster than the usual silence; and then with a careful *click* of silverware Mother put down her fork.

“Not everyone is capable of becoming Art,” she said carefully.

Father picked up his glass of wine and stared into it. “A man with a glass eye, did you say, seashell?” he asked. “What does he look like?”

“Well he—” Shelley said, and jumped when Mother stood up very quickly.

“This isn’t the place nor the time,” she said.

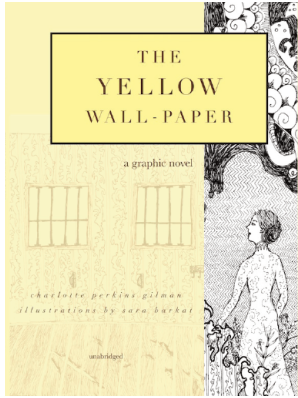
“It never quite is,” Father said mildly. But he stood up too, and without saying another word Mother and Father both left, Mother through her door and Father through his, and all at once Shelley was sitting in the center of a long, empty table, right in the middle of dinner, by herself.

She waited, because she didn’t want to be scolded if Mother and Father came back to find her having gotten up without being excused, but they didn’t come back very soon. She could hear the rumbling of the workmen’s steps in the kitchen, and other steps going up to the floor above, and she built a tower of her silverware: and then, finally, she became bored and uncomfortable enough to get up regardless.

Without even bothering to put on her boots—for she had no wish to creep through the photography studio again—she slipped quickly through the kitchen, past the things being opened and the smell of something rotten in the pipes, which was stronger here than anywhere in the house. The workmen were all standing around and exclaiming in odd tones, and the lines of their backs stood up like fence-posts. At the kitchen door Shelley slipped out in only her stockings, and ran out into the garden, feeling a terrible, uncomfortable itch; she felt that she had done something wrong, but did not know what, and only knew she could not stay still. And the only place Shelley could think of

to go was to her door, which always seemed to have a story behind it.

But when she got to the back of the garden, there, where the door had always been, was only a gaping, empty spot, with a mailbox nailed to it. And on the other side of a very discreet fence went zooming past all the cars and bicycles and carriages along the street, moving faster and faster like the ants by the water hose, as though they were afraid!



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