

Fiction by Dorian Gossy

The Door in the Woods

The cancer did not so much kill Frieda's mother as engulf her like rising water. Within a week of her death, Frieda's father had locked himself in the cabin at the edge of Frieda's property. He had the clothes on his back and the few amenities already in the cabin: a tuberculosis cure cot with raising back, a quilt, a door skin on cinder blocks for a desk. A chair, a functional woodstove, and a spring-fed spigot outside.

John Prade was seventy-eight. Despite the Prades' fractious marriage, their neighbors in Pittsburgh stood ready with casseroles and good cheer after the funeral. He fended off all generousities and phoned Frieda to come gather her mother's things. She drove down from her house on retired farmland in the Adirondacks.

"I want to get the hell out of here," he said when she arrived.

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The house had convulsed into unprecedented clutter, as though a huge hand had shaken everything off its shelves and out of drawers.

"Come live with me." Frieda had not planned to say it. "My house is big enough."

"Hell, no. I've seen it. Odd little box of a place. Too much land. Too cold up there. Here there's a furnished apartment across town."

"Let's pack you up today," Frieda said. Where had she acquired such calm? Neither parent had had any to spare. "I'll hire someone to clean this up and ship us the good stuff. Ralph and Cathy can help."

There would be a fight, of course. Days of cajoling, colluding with her brother, Ralph, on strategy. John Prade had the furious visage of a demonic Chinese mask. "You always got your way, didn't you?"

Frieda suddenly thought of her mother, pinched and dying, but strong enough in the last eight days of her life to banish her husband from her sickroom, pointing the way out with a waxy finger. At the time, Frieda imagined this act a kindness, though, in retrospect, there was nothing kind about her mother's fevered eyes.

“Well, I got a blue dress one time,” she said. “I remember promising everything for it.”

Frieda’s house was ten years old, modest but solid. Large windows brought her to a startling intimacy with firs, white pines, poplar, beech, maple. Her forty acres of browning autumnal grasses opened west toward the tower of Whiteface Mountain like an invitation.

Frieda had moved up from Pittsburgh after Lane, her husband of twenty years, fell in love with a student in one of the Spanish night classes he taught – a woman older than Frieda by ten years, with patrician cheekbones and gleaming silver blonde hair. They now lived in Utah. The whole of it had crept up on Frieda, who had felt the waning of Lane’s attention; fielded the calls from Stephanie, always so very cordial; and finally, marked the passion for stargazing Lane had evolved out of nowhere, requiring late nights out and the purchase of a new telescope whose case never seemed to scuff. The stars above her house on the farmland, so far away from where she and Lane had lived, shone in virulent profusion on cloudless nights.

“I understand wanting to get away,” Frieda ventured the second night, serving her father pea soup with lamb. He ate steadily, pausing for a swallow of his beer. “Coming up here was good for me. I can edit medical textbooks anywhere.”

She regretted this last admission. Her father seldom passed up an opportunity to berate her for dropping out of medical school in 1977, when she was just twenty-four.

John Prade finished his soup. “I was wondering about that cabin out there.” He jerked his head toward the south window, beyond which the rough one-room cabin stood a quarter of a mile

away. Frieda guessed that it had been thrown together as a hunting cabin in the late nineteenth century. “Show it to me.”

“Dad, it’s night. How about tomorrow?” Frieda said. “It’s pretty primitive. Rusted farm junk out there next to it. Broken old bottles.”

“Miss Frieda, you have been good to bring me here.” John Prade put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his folded hands. He’d not called her Miss Frieda since she was small enough to be wrestled into the itchy crinoline dresses thought cute for little girls in 1958. The rush of pleasure that swept her felt like shame. “But I don’t think it too much skin off your nose to take me out there right now,” he continued. “Or I’ll find my way by myself.”

Frieda stood and busied herself with collecting their dishes and tipping them into the sink.

“All right, I’ll take you out there,” Frieda said. She tried out a note of exasperation.

He snorted. “Don’t do me any favors, girl.” But after a long time in the bathroom, John Prade appeared at the back door with his coat on, shod in an abused pair of Wellingtons. Frieda readied her biggest flashlight and led them through the field.

Inside the cabin, he squinted at the sooty ceiling joists and walls as if they caused him pain. When he said he wanted a minute to look things over, Frieda left him the flashlight and returned to the house with only the smoke of the Milky Way for guidance. It wasn’t until midnight, while dozing in an overstuffed chair waiting for him, that Frieda began to worry.

She sweated inside the heavy coat she’d worn as she walked back down the thin path in the grass with a small Maglite. “Dad?” she called as she ap-

proached the cabin. All the drapes were drawn, but the door window had no cover. The door was locked, and she had no key. She hadn't known the door could lock. "Dad – are you in there?"

She shone the flashlight inside. At first the window threw the beam back into her own face. Then she could make out the recliner, the dead cluster flies and ladybugs piled in the corners, the edge of the cure cot. She shifted the light toward the cot and leaned her cheek against a windowpane. John Prade sat on the end of the cot, eyes on her. He blinked when the light struck his face. Frieda knocked on the glass. "Dad? It's after midnight. Are you all right?"

Without answering, John Prade bent down and pulled off his battered Wellingtons. He drew back the bedclothes and arranged his lean frame on the cure cot, pulling the comforter up to his neck. Once he stilled, only the contours of his body under the comforter marked anything different about the cold disuse of the room.

"Dad?" Frieda knocked once more. "I'm leaving my coat on the doorknob. I'll be back in the morning." A sensible person would have smashed open the door window, broken the lock. Frieda turned away coatless toward her house with inexplicable contentment.

Frieda's elder brother was a lawyer in Philadelphia. With two reasonable teenaged children and his nice wife, Cathy, Ralph's life had the well-crafted appearance of a Christmas crèche. He was happy, as he always told Frieda, because he had decided to be happy. Frieda found this willed happiness a human miracle, like a great gift for athletics or music.

Ralph approved of their father's move as a temporary measure. "He's still upset about Mom's death, of course," he

told Frieda over the phone. "It's so new, even though we knew it was coming."

John Prade had been in the cabin a week. Each night when Ralph asked after him, Frieda said, I think he's okay, which was the truth. "Ralph, have you ever wanted to get away from home? Just up and leave it all behind?"

"Of course not," Ralph said. "But I'm lucky, you see. And I work at keeping it that way."

"Well, what if you did? How would you get away?"

Ralph pushed out a breath. "What do you mean? I just said I never have."

The bare birches and white pines that grew along her land's rivulets shouldered each other irritably in the wind. Frieda turned away from the window, took a fresh tight grip on the phone. "Dad's locked himself in my old hunter's cabin."

"He's done what?" Ralph bellowed. "How is he surviving out there? It's December now, for Pete's sake! Won't that spigot freeze up? What's he supposed to do for water then?"

"I've been taking food out and putting it on the doorstep." Frieda said. "I take out blankets, and batteries for the flashlight. I got some clothes from the Catholic thrift store in Ausable Forks that should fit him. At least they're warm. He has a saw and a shovel and an axe. He's figured out the woodstove. I think he's thawing snow on the stove for wash water."

She could practically hear Ralph shaking his head slowly back and forth, as if at an opposing lawyer's dim client on the witness stand. Frieda had seen him do this – he had cajoled her into watching him argue a case before a jury once when she and Lane were visiting. "Sis, you said you were reeling him back into civilization."

“He’s keeping the place neat, I think.” Frieda tugged hard on the permanent braid she’d recently made of her long tangled hair. “He writes me thank-you notes for the food. He was never a big thanker, you know. You remember how he barked at Mom all the time.”

“Well,” Ralph’s voice rose, “are we talking about the same man? My father was gracious and sociable. Happily married. How do you think I got this way?”

“You? The self-made happy man?”

“Okay. Listen. I’ll come up this weekend, knock on the door, and if he won’t come out, we’ll get someone to get him out. You have a local sheriff, right?”

“Ralph, no. Don’t do that – not yet. Let me have some more time with him. I know it sounds idiotic, but I think – ” she scrambled for sentences – “I think I can get him to actually go home if I give him more time – ”

“Really? Why?”

“He’s making a sculpture,” Frieda lied completely. “The sort of lawn ornament thing Mom used to like in her garden. I think it’s a memorial for her.”

“Well, let me know,” Ralph said. “Sounds good, actually.”

It was Frieda who began the sculpture, using things from the old household dump outside the cabin door. She explored the dump in the afternoons, when John Prade was inside the cabin, the tang of his woodstove fire the only sign of life. He had fixed a sheet of newspaper to the door window. Out of the cold ground came bottles: milk of magnesia bottles in cobalt blue; amber motor oil and Clorox bottles; and Cra-Rock seltzer bottles, in glass as aqua as river ice. Frieda coaxed these lost things and others from the pit with lightly gloved hands. A truck license plate from 1940. A jar of Lustre-Creme Hair Dressing.

Warped and rusted gears, severed from the machines they had served. She rinsed everything in the tap from the spring and arranged the items in pyramids on the porch, by which, she imagined, someone’s mother might have been amused. Her own mother had disliked clutter, however, so her grave had only a low, polished marble marker. After her death, John Prade had vetoed the suggestion that the stone also include his name, or space for it.

Frieda let one editing deadline go by a few days while she dug in the dirt. And then another, a week. The medical textbook company liked her – it was all right. She even had benefits. At times she forgot the deadlines, forgot about her father inside the cabin while she dug. She had not knocked after the first night. His thank-you notes, scrawled on scrap paper Frieda brought out from her printer, were left pinched between the doorjamb and the door like a thumb.

“Dad, Ralph called. He wants to come get you out of there.”

Frieda had brought a chair out from the house and placed it next to the door, where she sat while scraping her finds from the dump. Below the doorknob a crack in the wood ran parallel to the door’s length, and it was near this crack that Frieda put her lips when she spoke. “Ralph always was kind of a meddler, wasn’t he? He used to come into my room without knocking.”

The snows held off for the first week in December, but the television news promised the first storm by week’s end. Still the spigot had not frozen. Frieda had bought a new warm coat for herself from the Catholic resale shop. She bought extra-heavy gloves from a mountaineering outfitter in Keene Valley. “I’ve found a Noxema jar out here, Dad, in that navy blue glass. With Deco letter-

ing – isn't that from the '30s?" John Prade had been an architect in his working life. His language had been finely rendered angles, his stories the blueprints that bore his name. "You always liked that style," Frieda said. "I remember not liking it when I was a kid – it spooked me. It reminded me of the Wizard of Oz."

John Prade didn't answer, but the next day when she went back, the arrangement of tool and bottle she'd been constructing had changed. A rooster weathervane dangled a ringed doorknocker from its cockscomb, both balanced on a feed bucket. A dozen of the bottles snaked nose to tail, no two of the same color touching.

"Dad, one time you asked what was wrong with me that made Lane leave. You said I might be – frigid, and maybe that was my problem." There seemed the tiniest breath coming from the fissure in the door. Flickering stove light – or was she imagining it? "Do you remember how I cried when you said it?"

He had commenced his own excavation in the dump. Fresh dirt piled up beside the pit. He'd hit a mother lode of pest-control items. The "Dead Easy" rattrap; a medieval-looking "Nash Mole Trap," all spikes and collars; and a choker mousetrap, wire guillotines set in a circle atop a square block of wood. These he arranged in a row across the pitted wood of a broken harvester.

A presence manifested on the other side of the crack in the door. Nothing visible, but when she inhaled the space through the door, Frieda thought of how one intuits an object or a silent person nearby in jet dark. She rubbed at a rust stain on a cornflower-blue Bromo-Selzer bottle.

"I used to – sort of – be attracted to other women, Dad." Frieda put down the jar. She scrubbed at a flake of paint

on the doorjamb with a chapped fingertip. "Not that I ever did anything about it. But there was a girl in junior high. Her name was Marla. She'd wear dresses out of Qiana, that silky material I've not seen since the '70s. And she was small and slim, like a caterpillar. I used to want to take hold of her around the waist. That was it."

A breeze whistled low in the door crack. "I thought about women later, though. When Lane found Stephanie. You know, he had his Spanish class come to the house for a party at the end of the semester that she was in his class. They stayed away from each other the whole party, but I saw him hand her a glass of wine. Then I knew. And then I started thinking about women and their breasts, when I was alone. The more he disappeared, the more I had those thoughts."

A sound like scurrying. A floorboard creak. Then a wedge of folded paper squeezed out from under the door. Frieda retrieved it. Like the other notes John Prade pinched in between the door and its jamb, the triangle of paper unfurled bore only the words, THANK YOU.

"You're talking to him." Ralph had that ruffled tone again.

"Yeah."

"And he's not talking back."

"Well, no – except with the notes I told you about." Frieda dug her fingers into her braid. She knew she should undo the braid, wash her hair all the way down. It had been two weeks.

"And this is conversation?"

"Well, he listens," Frieda said. "And I tell him things."

Ralph cleared his throat noisily. All his life, those neglected allergies. Frieda could remember him snoring when she was still sleeping in a crib. "What things?"

“Things I’ve never told anyone. He doesn’t respond, but I know he’s listening.”

“So.” Ralph’s voice grew muted. “What have you told him, exactly?”

Occasionally Frieda had gotten the upper hand with her brother during their childhood. Her ability to do so had been like predicting the weather – she could generally tell which situations would turn to her advantage, but nothing was guaranteed. She hadn’t sought it much. Ralph seemed to be a good brother. But she felt the same change in the timbre of his question that she’d come to recognize long ago as the shift of power. “I’ve told him about – my marriage. About Lane. About a girl from school. About you, some.”

“What did you tell him?” Ralph’s big baritone condensed to a whisper. “About me?”

Under the bridge a mile away from Frieda’s land the Ausable River furled itself into menacing rapids. Their churn took hold of her and Ralph, as though the craft of their conversation had lost its rudder. “I said you were pushy when we were young. I said you came into my room without knocking.”

“Did you tell him what – happened one time? You know, that time?”

Frieda searched the dark city of her memory. Something had happened. But then, something had always happened. What you did was knuckle your forehead and try to forget. She suddenly felt so, so tired, the way she’d worn out from her own grief when Lane left. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said to the pinprick holes of the phone’s mouthpiece.

“You did tell him. About when – I came in. I just wanted to see – a girl. Curiosity used to be healthy. The hairbrush was a really bad idea. You know I said I was sorry.”

“Ralph, I didn’t – ”

“I was only thirteen years old!”

The recollection as ordinary as that of breakfast, or a fishing trip in the summer. Ralph pinning her to the bed, bribing her with promises of candy and good behavior, so he could look between her legs and put things up inside her. She’d been nine. “Look, Ralph, how do you think I could tell Dad anything like that? I wouldn’t tell anyone that. I never even told Lane.”

“I’ll bet you’re lying. I’ll bet you told Dad.”

“Oh, go make yourself happy over this one,” she said, so weary. “For Christ’s sake.”

Ralph cleared his throat again, sharp and loud. “I’ll come, that’s all. I’ll come up and explain things to him. I’ll get in the car tomorrow. You’ll be there, right? Though I guess it doesn’t matter if you are or not. I know the way. You’ve got the key to your house under the stairs on a nail.”

“Go to hell, Ralph.”

“No joke. I’ll be there by dinner tomorrow. Don’t say anything to him.”

But Frieda had not been joking. “Okay,” she said.

Back in 1962, Frieda’s mother had discovered Ralph at his investigations of Frieda and punished them both. That was the end of it. “I don’t know if you heard about it,” Frieda continued to the crack in the cabin door. “We were grounded the same as if we’d been caught stealing, or gotten bad grades at school.”

Nothing stirred. The first storm had left five inches of snow. The spigot worked briefly at midday and then froze up again in the afternoon. John Prade had been building fires to warm it; charred logs spiraled out from the spigot’s entry point into the ground.

“Dad, he’s coming tomorrow to explain things to you. He thinks I told you before now. You – and me, too, I guess – are standing in the way of his happiness. You know how he feels about happiness.”

The evening was so still that the tiniest thing moving in the woods resounded like the snap of a leg breaking. It might have been a grouse, or a deer. A red squirrel. “Won’t you explain something to me, Dad?” Frieda said. “It doesn’t have to be why you’re – here in my cabin. It’s your cabin now. I mean, how about the theory of stresses in a skyscraper? Is there a formula you can rely on? How do architects know one building will stand and another won’t? I never paid attention. I was – looking into the body. Did you know the body is like a building? That’s what my anatomy teacher said.”

Frieda was about to rest her forehead against the doorjamb when the door opened with a ripping sound. She jerked back and stood up. Inside, the orange lights of a fire pulsed through the slits in the woodstove door. She waited, frozen on her feet. It had begun to snow. John Prade appeared and motioned her to come in.

The smell of the room was chaotic with extremes: unwashed body and balsam fir. Food beginning to turn, and the thick, sweet odor of hot wax from a few struggling candles. Crushed old newspaper, clothing from the last century, pine needles, mouse and squirrel shit spilled out of a fresh opening in the south wall. Charred drips streaked the flanks of the woodstove, and the floorboards blurred under a new layer of grime.

Her father stood like a stake in the center of the room. His new beard was stone white, his eyes glassy, and his bearing absolutely erect. When he tugged off his black knit cap, as an antique ges-

ture of respect, Frieda supposed, his hair whorled around his head as if wind-whipped. She had not seen him face to face in a month.

“I have in mind my last design,” John Prade said. His terrible glance swept the room. “Engineering the end of futurity.”

There was no precedent for this moment. The most Frieda had ever directly addressed with her father were calculus problems when she was in high school, and that had not gone well. “That’s – well, that’s just crazy sounding, Dad.”

When he swung his gaze to her, Frieda had to squint, as if at sun thrown off bright metal.

“You are not the only one who wants to get away,” he said. “I’m just not coming back.”

Their eyes were the same color: blue gray. She stared back. “Why?”

“Look at you, sequestered up here like a nun. And why is that? Because you can’t abide the smell of your own life. You and that boy-husband. Just try to tell me you’ll ever get over it.”

Frieda couldn’t draw a full breath. “You – you and Mom. What a lie – ”

A wretched, dry smile. “Exactly correct.”

“And all those years I thought your disdain a kind of love.”

“So you see.”

Frieda thought her whole body might fly apart. She felt she could kill and find it good. “So I see WHAT? That you’re giving up on life because you made a wreck of it? That you can’t do without Mom because she gave you someone to blame for your misery?”

“One side of the arch hates the other and pushes on it like a bull. That keeps the roof up.”

“What – you and Mom were a roof?”

“What do you think, Miss Frieda? Did we keep the rain away and your brother out of your drawers?”

Frieda felt the death-chill in odd places: the palms of her hands, inside her elbows, deep inside the curving walls of her hipbones, like cramps from the menstrual periods she'd stopped having over a year before. "I should never have told you that."

A green log in the woodstove hissed a long time as its sap boiled. John Prade considered his black knit cap as he crushed it in his hands. "Only a corroborating detail."

He was on a plane about to crash, alive but doomed. "I don't have a mother anymore," she said. "I'm not ready to give up a father, too."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Don't leave me." It cut Frieda's throat to say it. She'd said it to Lane.

"But I will. Sooner or later. It can't be helped."

Frieda went to her father and put her arms around him. He caught her in his arms like a lover. Never had they hugged so, not at graduation nor wedding day nor funeral. His body was as bony as a tree and smelled of rank, wild things. She loathed tears, but they poured down her face. She released him, and he stepped away.

"I still don't understand," she said, scrubbing her cheeks with a wool glove.

"I think you do." John Prade fetched and drew on another coat – the oversized one Frieda had given him his first night in the cabin – over the three he was already wearing. "You could have turned the dogs loose on me long ago."

"I still can, you know," Frieda said. "I only wanted you to be mine."

John Prade went to the door and opened it. The frigid air poured its leaden weight into the room. "I will be, from out there," he said, pointing at the thickening snowfall and to the blurring trees beyond. "If you'll let it."

Frieda dove into her parka and found her footing on the snowy porch. "I'll get Ralph. I'll get searchers."

But her father had already shut the door behind her.

By the time Ralph arrived three hours later, the snow was falling fast. He stooped to kiss his sister but caught himself and drew away after an awkward shoulder squeeze. Without removing his coat, he retightened his scarf and turned up his collar, turning to Frieda. "You know, I'm sorry about that – fooling around back then. Did I ever apologize?"

"No. But never mind about that now," Frieda said. She'd finally washed her hair, which cascaded damp and loose down her back. "It doesn't matter anymore."

Ralph returned in an hour. John Prade was gone. "Could he be somewhere else?" Ralph asked. "Could he be in the house? The garage?" When Frieda shook her head, Ralph threw his arms wide. "No footprints, of course – not with snow falling this hard. You got snowshoes?"

They searched until thwarted by a muddled, gray twilight boiling with snowflakes. Inside the house, they smacked snow off their clothing and kicked it out of their boots. Frieda could see Ralph trembling once he shed his parka. "That place he lived in – did you see it?"

"Yes."

"How did the walls get all charred like that? Somebody must have tried to burn it down. The bed scorched. No furniture. All the walls gutted? The insulation torn out? Did he do that?"

Frieda had avoided a direct glance at the cabin while they were searching, as though it were a former friend encountered on the street whom she'd badly

failed. "It was never in the greatest shape," she said.

Ralph found a beer in the refrigerator, one of a six-pack their father had never finished. He downed it quickly. "We need to call rescuers, maybe the sheriff. You got their number?"

The snow had fast laid down a six-inch blanket. In her mind's eye, Frieda watched her father moving through the furred quiet of the snowy woods. He'd be dressed in his tinker's layers, but his topcoat, the one Frieda had left for him his first night, would flap around unbuttoned. He'd have his shovel and his axe. He'd go up into the wildest part of her land, beset with blackberry brambles and willow and infant poplar all struggling for daylight. Nothing particular would mark the place where he would dig himself the grave that a trespassing dog will discover and bark at for hours the following spring. After taking what must have been days opening a hole in snow and hard ground only a week from freezing, John Prade will lie down in the hole, and cover himself well with dirt. In the spring, defying her attempts to shoo him away, the dog will hover with unmistakable sorrow as Frieda brushes aside the leaves and dirt enough to behold her father's corpse in its hole, his flesh and clothes merging with loam, before she closes the hole above him again.

This strange dog, black with white question marks over each eye, will always appear when she approaches the grave with a weekly offering of river stone that she will bring in by wheelbarrow through the muddy forest. The dog will mark the swelling cairn with his urine each time, gazing at her regretfully as he holds his leg back like a salute. Covered by duff and stone, his scent masked by dog pee, John Prade will belong to Frieda at last.

All I want to know is where Dad is, Ralph will say one day to the wide, lush field during a visit that summer, drinking gin on her porch. He will have had a full menu of law enforcement search and fail to find from Lake Champlain to Montreal. As Ralph's wife and teenagers play badminton on the coarse grass, he will look heavenward. Can't I just know where he is?

No, Frieda will think. No, you may not. And something like bliss will fill her.

*The Door in
the Woods*