

Miss Henrietta's Invisible Doors

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She moved her face close to mine, close enough that I could see the little crinkled lines around her eyes and smell her lilac body powder. She said she had something very important to tell me. It was something that most people know deep down in their bones, but choose to ignore. She told me that because she saw the Red-Tailed Hawk hesitate on the wind at the moment I called out “hello,” and because it was my eleventh Birthday—today she would tell me about the doors.

I came to know Miss Henrietta and Harry on my walks. They lived in a rambling structure. It looked like a little two-wheeled trailer, parked long enough to grow roots. Odd bits and pieces of stuff they'd found discarded came together magically to make more rooms. Whatever she was doing when I came by, Miss Henrietta would stop. We'd sit outside, in aluminum lawn chairs, listen to the woods, drink hot tea and (best of all) we'd talk.

“Where are the doors?” My curiosity was up.

“They are everywhere. If they've been used recently, it's easier to find them.” She took a sip of tea and looked up into the branches to follow the movements of a tiny bird.

“Summer Tanager,” she said.

“What do they look like?”

“It's that small scarlet bird that just flew up into the black oak.” She pointed up.

“No.” I was determined, “What do the doors look like Miss Henrietta?”

“Oh. They're invisible. You can't see them but you can feel them if you pay attention.”

“Where do the doors go?”

“The other side, dear. Don't be silly.” Her voice was soft and matter of fact.

“I don't understand.”

Miss Henrietta said I wasn't to worry, I soon would understand. She slowly leaned forward and straightened to stand, stretching with both hands on her hips, arching her back. The

two lawn chairs we used for our visits were so faded the plastic webbing lacked any recognizable color. Looking up at her long bony frame, I wondered how we'd become such good friends.

She pulled a hat from an antler hook to the right of her door, yelled "Back in a while" to the cabin and took up a walking stick.

"Let's go. We'll see what we can find." Without waiting for me to answer, she took off east, walking through the woods toward the county road.

I've rarely seen her husband, Harry. When I visit, he is usually napping or out cutting wood. She says he is a good man of few words, which made me wonder if he didn't know many words or he just didn't like saying them.

Miss Henrietta knows words, all right, big and small words for 'most everything in our Ozarks. She'll say, "Pay attention. This smooth and shiny bark tells you it's a fruit tree, wild cherry. Look up there."

As I'd be looking at the glisten of the bark, trying to remember it, she'd be fifteen feet ahead—talking about some vine or black rat snake. Miss Henrietta is hard to keep up with.

Today, we walked along the edge of the road, facing the traffic. Other than a truck stacked with cages of dirty white chickens, one red pickup blasting rock 'n roll, and a dusty sedan—there wasn't any real traffic.

Just past the curve at the McGill's driveway, Miss Henrietta stopped and stood real still. I froze in my tracks, too. After a minute she asked, "Can you feel anything?"

I really tried, but only felt a little breeze and heard some insects and the McGill's dog barking. "No, not really."

"It's okay if you don't feel it right off. It takes some practice. That was where the young Williams boy ran off the road about five years ago. That door has been shut a long time. There's a bunch more up here."

Across a gully and onto the tracks she climbed and I followed her. We were just south of the railroad tunnel and north of the Howard's Fork trestle when she stopped again.

"Close your eyes now and point to where you feel something different."

Goose bumps crawled from my wrists to my shoulders and I pointed.

"Good. Open your eyes now. We'll walk on, out of respect. Remember how that felt."

Miss Henrietta sounded pleased.

I'd been pointing at nothing—just gravel sloping away from the tracks, maybe eight feet from where we were standing.

Back on the road, she told me how after the slaves were freed, a bunch of them found work digging the tunnel for the Ol' Frisco line. Smallpox killed lots of those people and they were buried in the railroad bed.

“Yuck. That's creepy.”

“Times were different then.” She said that's how I'd been able to point to the door. “It's the door they passed through to the other side.”

Her timing as we walked along the road was amazing. Just as the idea that there *could* be invisible doors sank into my head, we came to a homemade white cross with bright pink and red plastic flowers wired to it. Around here, if someone dies in an automobile accident, the family puts up an arrangement to mark where their loved one died, so it had to have been a car wreck. The ground was disturbed, grass torn up revealing smeared dark earth. One section of the fence wasn't repaired yet.

Miss Henrietta closed her eyes and turned her face to catch the sun. She smiled and seemed to relax, breathing deeply and slowly.

“Do you feel this door?” she asked, eyes still closed.

“Yeah. I think so.” And I did feel something a little different. To have a grown person encourage this kind of thing was so unusual, so special. Imagining colors swirling around us, I knew I could never tell my parents or anyone about this. For a moment everything seemed more alive and real to me, like in a movie when the music gets loud and the picture is right there and enormous.

I don't know how long we stayed that way, arms out, feeling the world humming.

“It's time to go back now.” She turned and began moving her long legs, while her stretched-thin shadow moved around to follow her.

After we walked a ways I asked, “What’s it like on the other side?”

“Nobody knows for sure ‘til it’s their turn.” she replied. “See everybody gets born with a certain number of days in the palm of each hand. When those days are used up, they find a door. It’s a good thing, dear. They are at peace. That’s it. Now you know about the invisible doors.”

* * *

That night after dinner, the birthday cake and the presents, Mom and I sat on the porch outside while Dad and my brother watched TV. Mom asked me if I’d seen Miss Henrietta.

“Yes.” I tried to keep it simple, so I wouldn’t tell too much.

“Did she talk about Mr. Harry?” Mom’s voice was softer than normal. Katydid’s whooshed their songs back and forth across the yard.

“No, Mom. We went walking along the tracks and talked. She showed me a Tanager. That’s all.”

“Honey, I don’t know how to tell you this but Mr. Harry died in an automobile accident yesterday. It was just past the old railroad crossing. . .”

I could see her mouth moving, but I couldn’t hear her after she told me Mr. Harry died.

I cried ‘til I couldn’t breathe. I cried harder than I’ve ever cried. I cried ‘cause Miss Henrietta told me about the invisible doors and how it was all right. Mom put her arm around me. I put my head in her lap and we rocked.

