

Tyler and the Small Door

by D. M. Riemer ©2023

The basement at 65 Fieldstone Drive had twenty-two doors, but only one of them actually went anywhere. The other twenty-one were doors in retirement, stacked against the dusty wall in four tilted piles, like big flat dominos already committed to toppling. When newlyweds Bob and Janet Harrison bought the house in 1962, they felt the original frame-and-panel doors were too old-fashioned, so Bob replaced them all with nice flat mid-century alternatives. This happened before the time when homeowners felt comfortable simply tossing unwanted pieces of equity into a dumpster, so Bob Harrison stacked the twenty-one old doors in the basement. And there they remained, becoming a home to mice, crickets, silverfish, and a vast community of spiders. The doors asked for nothing and caused no trouble. Anyone wanting to find the twenty-second door would eventually have to move most of the others, but no one realized that at the time. The twenty-second door hadn't arrived yet.

The house at 65 Fieldstone Drive was constructed in 1923. It wasn't quite Craftsman, not quite Tudor, not precisely Deco, but an uneasy amalgam of all three. When it was listed for sale last year, many potential buyers found it hideous. Appearance aside, it was solid, spacious, convenient to highways and shopping, and had a two-car detached garage that spoke "man cave" to home buyer Alex Burke. (The garage spoke "yoga studio" to Danica Burke, but she would trade that particular marriage negotiation card for free rein with paint colors and window treatments.) The Burke's offer, counter-offer, inspection, financing, and closing could have set a speed record. In less than six weeks, they assumed a 20-year fixed rate mortgage at 6.8 percent and prepared to pull up stakes.

The only one not happy with this plan was 14-year-old Tyler Burke. Moving to Fieldstone Drive would place him in a new school system. It would also push Bold Wombat Comics and Games, the center of his non-academic universe, beyond comfortable cycling range. But the

overwhelming issue was more hormonal, a literal Girl Next Door in the person of Megan Tierney. Megan was smart, funny, athletic, outgoing, and—the kiss of death—she was 17. As far as any possible romance with gangly freshman Tyler, she may as well have been 40. Most agonizing of all, she was nice! She had developed a friendly speaking acquaintance with Tyler and treated him with warm, sisterly kindness. At the Tierney's last Christmas party, she listened patiently for well over three minutes as Tyler voiced his passion for the Xbox game Halo, clear evidence that there was something deep between them. Tyler's crush was hopeless and lethal. His parents might drag him to a new house, but his heart would remain behind.

All through Spring, Tyler implemented a strategy of pleading and sulking, but his parents now existed behind a shield of home-buying bliss. Nothing could diminish their enthusiasm for chestnut moldings, maple floors, stainless steel appliances, space, charm, character, and a mysterious concept his father called Good Bones. Tyler had never suspected that their modest split-level on Dobson Place possessed bad bones. Go figure.

Alex and Danica Burke took possession of 65 Fieldstone Drive on the last Friday in June, surging into the house with the eagerness of puppies just let out of a crate. Within 24 hours they were unpacking glassware in the kitchen, hanging family photos in the den, and stretching their physical and emotional lives to fit the new space. Tyler did nothing but assemble his game system. He'd recently begun to explore a new game—Kena: Bridge of Spirits—hoping that mastery of the Ember Lab offering, with its female protagonist, might lure Megan into a new conversation. It wasn't Halo, but still.

And as sometimes happens, the weather changed everything.

Early July brought a drenching two-day rain. The house didn't have adequate drainage (the building inspector missed this entirely) and most of the basement flooded. As it was now home to dozens of moving boxes yet to be unpacked, this spelled a problem. The boxes on the floor had become sponges, collapsing toward a soggy doom.

The clean-up job had Tyler's name all over it. School was out, Mom and Dad both worked, end of story. Alex made an evening run to Home Depot and returned with a wet-vac, mop, bucket, and several fans. So, at ten the next morning, there was Tyler, halfway down the basement stairs, eyes probing the mirror-flat water, worried about becoming a victim in his own horror movie. (It was a basement, after all.) As if that weren't enough, Covid had left Tyler with a nagging fear of hidden pathogens. He wore an N95 mask and nitrile gloves, and had placed a

canister of alcohol wipes in the kitchen for later decontamination. His father had assured him there was no black mold in the house, but this didn't seem like a good time to trust the building inspector.

From the stairs, Tyler saw that one part of the floor was still dry, a space roughly four by fifteen feet along the west wall. It was open except for a collection of old doors.

Remember the doors?

The doors looked massive, faintly antique, and had occupied their corner of the basement for so long that they seemed to have grown there, feathered smoothly into the foundation by layers of dust and cobwebs.

Tyler resumed his slow descent. The flooded basement offered certain Instagram potential, so he began to shoot video with his phone, recording a dim, grainy view of boxes, ceiling joists, spiderwebs, and old wiring. On the bottom step, he crouched and slowly extended the toe of one scuffed Nike into the water. It touched the floor when immersed about half an inch. Tyler felt a hot flush of embarrassment. He stopped recording, pocketed the phone, and splashed across the floor, pulling the strings hanging from a few white porcelain fixtures. Four 60-watt bulbs made the basement somewhat less dim, and he recorded another video clip from a new angle. Okay, he could handle this.

Tyler returned to the kitchen, then came bumping back down the stairs with the wet-vac, just unboxed and smelling like a new car. He connected it to a power outlet using a 100-foot extension cord, snapped it on, and pushed the suction head into the flood. Water rushed in immediately, creating a visible current in the surrounding puddle. Tyler took out his phone and shot another video, a close-up of wet-vac magic. "Check it out dad," he said. "The power of suction! Amazing!" Under his mask, Tyler smiled. Performing this simple task alone, with no issues, was somehow deeply satisfying; he was used to tripping over issues in virtually everything. He put his phone away and began hunting deeper water.

After twenty minutes, Tyler had reduced the flood to a collection of glassy spots on the uneven concrete, so it was time to open up some dry space by moving the old doors. The chief concern was avoiding spiders; there were some big ones. And the doors were heavy! But Tyler was rangy, fit, and a fair problem solver. Why not walk the doors across the floor? He could swing them on the bottom corners, left, right, left, right. It would be slow, but it might work.

This turned out to be a painstaking job. If he tilted a door too far, it threatened to get

away from him, and he nearly dropped the first one. He also had to be careful to avoid smashing the lightbulbs on the low ceiling or getting hung up on a loop of wiring. But by the third door, he had a system. Look for spiders. Brush off spiders. Grab door. Tilt upright. Swing left. Swing right. Repeat. Lean into a new pile. After about half an hour he had moved fourteen doors. Soon he could begin shifting all the soggy boxes to the dry floor.

Tyler was walking another door to its new location when a sound came from somewhere behind him. He froze and snapped a look over his shoulder: nothing there but darkness and old doors. Hearing something yet not seeing anything was a movie moment he wanted no part of. What had he heard? The noise was easiest to describe in terms of what it wasn't. It wasn't mechanical, or electrical, or animal. It may have been two sounds together, some sort of words combined with a solid thump. But now the basement was silent except for tiny wet sounds from shifting his feet.

Tyler pulled out his phone and found his mother's number. (While the cleanup project fell solidly in Dad's purview, Mom was the go-to for sudden anxiety.) But Tyler knew he was at a delicate age. Fourteen made him very much a kid, but too old to be calling mom over a mysterious noise in the basement. "Fuck this," he said, and immediately felt more adult. The phone went back into a pocket, and he resumed walking the door to the south wall, determined to show the basement who was boss.

Tyler assessed the final door in the third stack. No visible spiders. He grabbed it, tilted, and began the first swing, lining up his path across the floor. At that moment a soft breeze kissed the back of his neck. It carried a scent he hadn't smelled in years, a hint of salt air, seaweed, a beach at low tide. His attention on the door wavered. Then he heard two quiet scuffs that had to be footsteps. Keeping both hands on the door, he shot a look behind him.

Tyler screamed. No words, just an explosive animal shriek of terror. The door slipped out of his hands, clipped a light bulb, and slammed into the floor. Splinters of glass showered down onto a space suddenly much darker. The strength vanished from his legs. He dropped, scooting backward, eyes locked on something impossible.

The fallen door had revealed another door, a small door, mounted in a metal frame set into the wall. It seemed like a miniature of the others: dark wood, stained, dusty, cobwebbed. It was about two feet wide and five feet high, and at that moment it was swinging fully open. This revealed a vaguely human figure, short, one hand just dropping to its side.

Tyler scrambled toward the foot of the stairs, the light from the kitchen an island of safety. Then a voice spoke from behind him. It was a kid's voice, calling out in some fluid language that sounded like a mashup of Russian and Swahili. Sprawled on the basement floor, Tyler looked back.

The small door in the west wall opened on a tunnel of blackness. Standing closer, directly under a surviving light bulb, stood a girl. She seemed about twelve years old, with dark hair cut very short. Some sort of ideograms decorated her left cheek. Her eyes were different colors, an icy blue on the right, the green of new leaves on the left. She wore a sort of coverall equipped with dozens of lumpy pockets; over this was a harness of thick, knotted cords. A stout rope was tied to the harness. It swept onto the floor, passed through the small door, and disappeared down the tunnel behind her. As Tyler watched, some unseen agency pulled the slack out of the rope, as if preparing to reel her in.

The girl flashed a big grin, bowed like a courtier, and spread both arms wide. She dropped her hands to her hips and nodded crisply at Tyler, suggesting some mutual understanding. Then she folded her legs, sat on the damp floor, and began sorting through her pockets, all the while chattering away in Russhili. Tyler's mind was spinning; there was no movie moment for this. He wanted to run, to call his Mom, to just get back to the boring safety of drying out the basement, but a tiny part of him blossomed with wonder. He drew in his legs and sat on the wet floor about five feet away. The girl gestured at the stacks of boxes nearby, still producing a high-speed stream of musical words. "I can't understand you," Tyler said. "Okay? I just can't." Tyler made wise monkey gestures, covering his ears and mouth, and the girl seemed to understand. She voiced a rising and falling "Ahhh" that was pretty unmistakable.

The girl circled a hand around her mouth, cupped her lower face, and uttered a few inflecting syllables. Huh? Oh. Tyler took off his N95 mask and held it toward her. She accepted the mask, examined it like a jeweler assessing an uncut gem, then hooked the elastics over her ears and settled the mask in place. As she took her hands away, her eyes flew up and she laughed like this was the best birthday present ever. "Uh, we have a lot more, if you want some," Tyler said. He stood, walked along the piles of boxes, opened one a few rows down, and returned with a 50-count box of stylish black N95 masks. (The Burkes had pandemic legacy items by the dozen.) Tyler opened the box and pulled one out. "See?"

The girl's eyes widened. She released a torrent of excited Russhili, searched through her

many pockets, and one by one placed a collection of items on the floor. There was a short knife fashioned from clear crystal, a handful of knobby nuts, a spool of bright blue thread that shone with its own light, a shiny green beetle the size of a baby's fist, a silver device resembling a compass (which pointed east), a small, leather-bound book (she opened it to reveal pages of intricate maps), and a Maxell audio cassette in a cracked plastic case. Tyler could make out a handwritten label: "Van Halen road mix."

Tyler's mouth hung open. He looked from the collection to the girl. She swept a hand across her goods, tapped the N95 box, then touched each item in turn.

She wanted to make a trade.

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The first floor at 65 Fieldstone Drive had been transformed by an aggressive remodel twelve years ago, which created an open-concept cooking, dining, and entertaining space. That night, the Burkes took full advantage, eating a savory, if largely leftover, dinner of pasta, chicken, and salad. Danica and Alex drank white wine.

The parents had arrived home from their respective jobs at about 6:00 PM. In under ten seconds they detected something off about their son. Tyler seemed to be holding back a vast, secret amusement. The Burkes had been down this road before, and chose not to push, though Alex gently asked, "The basement all good? I got your videos. Seemed like you had no trouble. Did anything happen?" At this, Tyler stifled a giggle and said, "Nope, all good. Wanna take a look?" Alex did.

Father and son descended to the decidedly less damp basement. The dry space by the west wall had been cleared, the waterlogged boxes moved into place, and the old doors stacked against the south wall. Tyler had set the fans running hours ago, and the floor was dry. "Fantastic!" Alex said. "You rule, dude. Uh, why'd you leave one door over there?" He pointed to a single old door still leaning against the west wall, now standing behind a stack of boxes. Tyler was ready for this question and delivered a quick misdirection. "Oh, that one?" He replied, "I left that because... Oh, Dad, I forgot to tell you! I'm so stupid! When I was moving the boxes, the bottom fell out of two of them, they were like so soaked, and stuff spilled everywhere, so I had to repack some stuff. It was kind of a mess, but I got everything put away. Do you want me to show you?" Alex smiled and clapped his son on the shoulder. "I am delighted that my son can improvise. Great job. Let's go eat!" Alex began climbing the stairs. Tyler rose a pace behind

him, casting a glance back at the lone door by the west wall.

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As he tried to find sleep that night, Tyler endlessly replayed his experience in the basement: the small door, the tunnel of blackness, the young trader. Her presence seemed to create a tangible zone of Other in the basement. Where did she come from?

Tyler had lifted her items one by one. Their touch triggered a jolt of something beyond mere tactile perception. They felt nearly alive, more real and utterly present in his hand than anything he'd ever encountered. When he reached for the beetle, it spoke in a tiny liquid voice. Tyler jerked his hand back, and the girl chuckled and rolled her eyes as if at some old joke, then muttered a short phrase. Tyler was sure she had just said, "Yeah, ignore him, he always says that." That's when he remembered the phone in his pocket.

But he didn't take it out. Didn't film or snap. The idea of recording this singular moment with something as mundane as a phone camera felt wrong. Tyler wanted this experience in his memory, close to his heart, and nowhere else. It wasn't something to share.

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The attic at 65 Fieldstone Drive opened at the top of a narrow stairway from the second-floor hall. It seemed like the most ignored room in the house and should make a good hiding place. Tyler wrapped his trade goods in thin sheets of foam, tucked them inside an old school backpack, and shoved it behind a layer of fiberglass insulation near the floor.

The girl had traded Tyler the crystal knife, the spool of bright blue thread, and the compass. In exchange, Tyler had given her a box of N95 masks, a box of 100 blue nitrile gloves, and a dozen or so 1990s CDs that were briefly in vogue among his friends a few years ago. (Somewhere in the unpacked boxes was a Sony CD player, purchased by his mom for \$21.95 on eBay.) The girl balked a bit at Tyler's asks, clearly one to drive a hard bargain, until he dug out the CDs. She really wanted them and went nuts for the intact lyric inserts, so she tossed in the Maxell audio cassette to sweeten the deal. They shook hands on it. Touching the girl produced a sensation like touching the objects, but stronger, and it made Tyler gasp. She seemed like a Technicolor girl against a muddy black and white background. Grinning, Tyler added his left hand to the grip, like a diplomat welcoming a head of state. She laughed at this but reciprocated. It was business, after all. Customers can be funny. How many customers did she have? How many basements did she visit?

Tyler wanted one more look at the crystal knife. He unwrapped it and moved to a nearby window. The knife glittered in a ray of sunlight. There were subtle refractions in the blade, an unexpected rainbow cast on the wall.

Tyler ran a finger along the edge. He felt nothing at all but learned immediately how many capillaries lie just under the skin. Crimson drops the size of quarters hit the floor. Tyler dropped the knife and looked at his finger in growing panic. Blood welled out so fast it pattered to the floor like rain. He looked around wildly for a few seconds, then grabbed a handful of his T-shirt and wrapped it around his finger. By now there was a constellation of fresh blood on the floor. In the drab attic it was like a neon sign. Panic flowed up his body in an icy tingle.

Tyler raced down to the bathroom, dug in a drawer and threw a collection of first aid supplies on the vanity. Ten minutes later, after trying everything from Liquid Bandage to first-aid tape, he had the bleeding under control. His bandage, while effective, created the impression that he had stuck his finger inside an egg. He still had to deal with the smears of blood on his hands, face, neck, portions of the bathroom, and of course his T-shirt, now lying on the floor. Tyler scooped it up, raced back to the attic, re-wrapped the knife, and began hiding the backpack under the insulation.

He hadn't heard his mother come in the back door.

"Hey Tyler, you want to order pizza?" called Danica from downstairs. Tyler was shirtless, smeared with blood, and the floor looked like a crime scene. The attic door was open. "Yeah!" Tyler called. "Pizza'd be great!"

"Are you in the attic?" Danica called. "What are you doing?" Tyler could hear his mom coming up to the second floor. "I'm just organizing the attic a little." He called, cringing.

For Danica, a big warning light began flashing. "Oh. Oh, thanks. Lemme see," she said. She reached the second-floor hall and began climbing the attic stairs.

Tyler screamed, "DON'T COME UP HERE!" Danica stopped on the steps, now actually scared. "I'm, I'm looking at porn. I didn't want you to see me."

Danica raced up the attic stairs. "Tyler how are you looking at porn in the—" and she saw the crimson smears on her shirtless son, many drops of blood on the floor, and his backpack peeking out from behind the insulation.

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There are few good family meetings. They tend to happen when parents must address

trauma, bad behavior, or impending doom. The Burke's family meeting began shortly after Alex arrived home from work. Danica spent a few minutes bringing her husband up to speed, stressing the point that Tyler was fine. Totally, completely fine.

They sat at the dining room table. Danica had placed a new, more compact bandage on Tyler's finger. The backpack was on the table, next to the knife, the spool of glowing thread, the compass, and the Maxell audio cassette. Alex was in full progressive dad mode, trying to radiate inexhaustible support and acceptance. Danica sipped from a glass of wine. Tyler stared at the table and said nothing. A 14-year-old has few options at a family meeting, and silence is generally a good one.

Alex took a deep breath. "I keep getting hung up on why you felt you had to hide them," he said. He looked at Tyler. Danica stared at her wine, twisting the glass by the stem. Tyler visibly squirmed. Silence was played out, so he shifted to plan B: lie.

"Look, I found that stuff in the attic and just wanted to keep it, okay? I hardly have anything of my own. Why is it such a big deal? I just thought it might, it might be nice to start a collection, cause they're like stuff I see in games, you know? I mean people left these things here, right? So why can't I just keep them?" Tyler was right on the edge of tears. He looked from Alex to Danica, back and forth, trying to gauge if he had an ally.

Alex took another breath. "Okay. But why hide them?"

Tyler exploded off the chair and backed away from the table. "God," he yelled, "you don't understand anything! Some stuff is just personal! Why is that such a problem!" He gripped his head as if it might explode and his eyes overflowed.

For Danica and Alex, this was a paradigm shift. They felt blessed that their son had never been a liar. Chronic deception was a frightening, toxic behavior that they heard about far too often. Based on the experience of friends, a child's lies could escalate to drug use, crime, a slippery slope into teenage chaos. With this one incident, their 14-year relationship with Tyler had tilted; his fabrication was so achingly obvious. Alex and Danica simply wanted to do the right thing, but there was no map for finding it. Each of them was wondering what they, or their spouse, had done wrong. Whose fault was this?

Alex picked up the spool of glowing blue thread. "There a battery in this? Or something?" he asked. The energy in the room shifted. The sense of accusation diminished. Tyler lowered his hands, wiped his eyes, looked at his father. "Yeah," Tyler said. "Yeah, I guess.

Little battery inside.” Alex put the spool of thread back on the table. “Cool,” he said. “So what’s up with that Hobbit door in the basement?”

Tyler looked like he might throw up. “Uh,” he said. “Hobbit door?”

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All three of them trooped down the basement stairs and moved toward the west wall. As Alex crossed the floor, he pulled the strings to turn on other lights; he had replaced the broken bulb, a step Tyler had missed.

Tyler replayed the final moments in his mind: the girl gathering up her trade goods and lifting the small tote bag he’d provided; the girl stepping into the tunnel with its sultry, salty atmosphere; the girl turning to face him with a smile and giving a farewell wave. All the slack had already been drawn out of the rope. Then she pulled the door closed. Tyler had placed one of the old doors in front of the small door and then stacked moving boxes in front of it. But sometime earlier, Alex had moved everything aside, so now the whole family stood looking at this unexpected addition to their new home, the small door in its metal frame.

“I found it last night,” Alex said. “I figured I’d move that last door to be over with the others, you know, just to finish the process.” This would not be the first time Alex had expressed disappointment at his son’s failure to finish a process. He turned to Tyler. “So I guess you haven’t seen this little door yet?”

Tyler had grown pale. “Uh, no. No. Weird. Um, is it locked?”

Alex flashed a playful look, wiggled his eyebrows, and spoke in a Creepshow voice. “Actually, it’s not. And you’ll never guess what’s on the other side.” Alex unlatched the small door and swung it wide. “Behold!”

But there was nothing on the other side. The west wall continued unbroken behind the small door. It was just painted cement blocks, crumbly with efflorescence, laid by a forgotten mason over a century ago. The passage to an unknown seaside wouldn’t open again for another twenty-eight days.

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The house at 65 Fieldstone Drive began to acquire new doors, but not the kind you can open with a knob. A door stood closed and solid between Tyler and his parents. There had been growing distance for several years; now there was a barrier. Another door slammed shut between Danica and Alex, as each secretly blamed the other for some parental misstep that had triggered

Tyler's deception. And an unexpected door of separation dropped between Tyler and his friends, even his longtime gamer buds. He cared only for one thing.

Tyler haunted the basement. He explored every inch of the small door and the wall behind it. The door was utterly unremarkable, save for the fact that it didn't belong there. He tugged on it, banged on the wall, called out. No tunnel appeared, and the entire encounter began to feel like a dream. His parents let Tyler keep the trade goods. They knew full well that they had yet to hear an honest explanation, but they could find no harm in it. Every day, after his parents left for work, Tyler carried the items down to the basement and arrayed them on the floor where he and the girl had sat. He would gaze at the door like a sailor on the quayside waiting for a lover to return from across the sea.

And then one day, when he descended the stairs, the small door stood open and the girl was already there. He smelled the sea tang mingled with the basement's earthy damp. The girl watched him and smiled as he reached the floor. He'd know those blue and green eyes anywhere. But her hair was now collected in a long braid that wrapped around her neck. Her coverall was black, shot through with glittering silver threads. The ideograms on her left cheek had changed and included new shapes in a rainbow of colors. Her coverall seemed to have no pockets, but she carried a satchel in each hand; they looked exactly like doctors' bags from the beginning of the last century. But what made Tyler's universe skew was the girl's age. Instead of twelve, she looked to be about his mother's age, which was thirty-nine.

The girl still wore a harness, tied to a rope that disappeared through the small door. As Tyler watched, it slithered away behind her into the darkness. Some new scars marked the girl's face, and there was an ugly slash on her right wrist.

Less than a month had passed for Tyler. How many years for her?

Even if the girl had understood English, he wouldn't know what to say. The girl felt no such reticence. She fired out a burst of Russhili, strode forward, and threw her arms around him. The embrace overwhelmed Tyler with the urgent, screaming Thereness of her. He squeezed her back, closing his eyes, breathing her in. She had a warm, sweaty, spicy smell and he wanted to drown in it. But the girl pulled his arms away and stepped back. She was now taller than Tyler by a good three inches. She glanced around the basement, back to Tyler, then settled on the floor and began to search through one of the satchels. It was time for another trade.

The old backpack, containing the original four items, remained on a hook behind Tyler's bedroom door. He suspected his mother of checking it from time to time, and he didn't want her finding the new trade goods. The attic was no longer an option, so he created a hiding place on a bookshelf in his room by pulling all the books forward a couple of inches. He placed larger books at the end of the shelf to hide the gap.

After the second trade, Tyler walked away with a small ceramic game board that came with a set of wooden tokens carved like trees. He also took a collection of spices in slender glass jars. Tyler liked the cooking competitions on TV and thought he might try his hand in the kitchen sometime. His third item was a compact roll of supple leather containing a dozen or so thin metal tools. After examining them Tyler realized they were lock picks. He found it remarkable that the girl came from someplace that also had locks, which sometimes needed to be picked. Maybe barriers, and the need to remove them, were universal.

When the girl arrayed her goods on the floor, Tyler was at a loss over what to offer in exchange. He raced to his room and grabbed old toys, hand-painted game miniatures, a few books, his favorite sweater, his newest pair of shoes, and detritus from his desk drawers. Back in the basement, the girl's choices made no sense to him. She wanted the cheap toothbrush wrapped in clear cellophane, four old thumb drives of no use to anyone, a broken camera lens from his dad's Nikon SLR, and a handful of wave-rounded beach pebbles he had collected on vacation when he was five. But she also took all the hand-painted miniatures, which Tyler understood completely. They were highly collectible.

Again, Tyler felt that wonderful handshake. But he wanted to stop thinking of her as The Girl, so he drew upon his vast interior library of movie scenes; he had seen this one most recently in the 2016 film "Arrival." As she slipped her items into a satchel, he got her attention. "Tyler," he said, pointing at his chest. She looked at him. "Tyler," another point. "You?" And he pointed at her. Her smile broadened, but she looked away and wobbled her head a bit from side to side; did she want to do this? She did. "Luhdhali," she said. She patted her chest. "Luhdhali." Then she swatted his chest with the back of one hand. "Tyler? Tyler." She gave his name a strange accent and Tyler beamed. "What does it mean?" he asked. "Luhdhali?" He gestured around the room, raised his eyebrows. "Luhdhali?" She looked confused, then dug into a pocket, producing a fold of paper and a very ordinary-looking yellow pencil. She drew a quick sketch, simple but clear, and passed it to him. It showed a tiny fish, a metal hook piercing its body.

Knotted to the hook was a line that ran up off the paper. She tapped the tiny fish. “Luhdhali,” she said. Tyler began to feel sick. His wonderful trader was bait.

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The house at 65 Fieldstone Drive now became a sort of trap, even with all the doors open. Neighbors rarely saw Danica and Alex together. Some speculated that the Burkes were in therapy, their marriage hitting a bad patch. They both seemed to spend a lot of extra hours at their respective jobs. Tyler made no new friends, even after two local gamer dudes from the Halo forum sent him direct messages. He seemed preoccupied. Danica and Alex just seemed lost.

After the second trade, the girl’s departure felt very different. The first time, she seemed like a Girl Scout heading home to mom and cookies. Have a great day! See you soon! This time, as she stooped to enter the tunnel, she met Tyler’s eyes for just a moment. Her face was grim, like a prisoner heading back to her cell after an hour in the sun. And maybe that wasn’t so far wrong.

Was her name even a name? Or was it a label? Tyler supposed Luhdhali might mean something like trout or minnow, but he didn’t really think so. The look on her face when she pointed to the picture carried a sense of resignation, even shame. Her name was her job. Catching customers. He decided to think of her as Kena, from the Ember Lab game, a spirit guide on a sacred quest. He began to spend a lot more time playing Bridge of Spirits on Steam.

As August went by, Tyler saw very little of it. He rarely left the house. His parents were generally out the door before he rose and arrived home after eight, so he lived on microwaved meals eaten alone. On weekends, his father tinkered endlessly with an old Triumph motorcycle in the garage, while his mom pretended to plan family dinners, vacations, and parties that never happened. As the days passed, Tyler began to long for the family they had been. His mom and dad had turned into ghosts, and the wonder of Luhdhali’s visits couldn’t replace them. Tyler knew his lies were responsible. He considered telling them about what sometimes came through the small door, but 14-year-olds aren’t equipped to explain impossible truths.

Toward the end of August Tyler realized there were twenty-eight days between the girl’s two visits. If she returned at all, and if there was a pattern, she would be back on September 2nd, just seven days away. But the times of her arrival were not the same. Her first appearance was late morning, about eleven o’clock, while the second was closer to ten o’clock. Perhaps she

would return at about nine.

September 2nd fell on a weekend. His parents would be home. Maybe it didn't matter. They never came down to the basement anyway. However, to create a little more assurance of privacy, he set up an improvised desk in one corner, with a spare chair and a lamp from the attic. He explained that the basement was his new personal writing space, to work on a journal. His parents didn't question it.

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On September 2nd, Tyler descended to the basement at seven AM. His parents were both in the kitchen, right at the top of the stairs, so he had pulled the door closed behind him. They were used to this. He moved his desk lamp to the floor, lighting up a box of ancient machine parts he found in the garage.

The waiting was agonizing. Distant sounds reached him through the floor overhead. He heard his dad go out the back door and his mom walk into her office; she would surf travel and cooking sites before a deep dive into Facebook and Instagram. Tyler paced around the basement like a prisoner in a cell. He counted the ceiling joists, performed an entirely fake karate routine, drew a floor plan that imagined his bedroom below ground, and even wrote a few pages in his make-believe journal. Then he smelled the breath of an unknown shore creep over him.

Tyler looked up from his journal to see a great and terrible wonder. The small door was open. Approaching with slow, measured steps was a tall, slim woman with short grey hair. There were no ideograms on her face, though fine wrinkles surrounded her eyes and spread down her neck. She wore a blue twill coverall exactly like the ones he saw mechanics and truck drivers wear. Below the left shoulder was a red and white name tag reading "Carson." The coverall had few pockets, but the woman carried a sort of shapeless duffle bag on a strap. As before, a stout harness wrapped around her torso and shoulders. The rope tied to it followed her like a pet snake. She favored Tyler with a wistful smile, a little wave. She looked about 70 years old.

Tyler knew she would be older. It was part of the pattern. But seeing the reality made him dizzy. He fought to slow his breathing.

He couldn't help asking, "Is it you?"

The woman nodded. "Yes," she said.

Tyler burst out, "Oh my God!" He couldn't contain himself and kept repeating "Oh my God!" He hugged her and she did not resist, but her embrace felt entirely different. To Tyler, it

felt like hugging his grandmother. But he loved his grandmother, so this really couldn't be bad. Then it hit Tyler that, with such a strange distortion of time, this would be her last visit.

"How did you learn English?" he asked.

"Others. Ones I catch, take back," she said.

"Why didn't you take me back?"

"You not ask. And I like you."

Grief rushed through Tyler like a surge of nausea. He sobbed from deep in his chest and tears ran down his face. "Come. We trade," the woman said. She sat down on the floor and began searching through her duffle bag. Tyler pulled over his box of machine parts. He had to keep wiping his eyes to see what she arrayed on the floor. There was a bright red snake smaller than a finger, held inside a glass triangle. There was a music box, several fruit resembling black apples, a coil of braided metal cable, a wax cylinder from an early Edison voice recorder, a small brass telescope with a three-lens turret, a miniature painting showing a vast desert city, a large speckled cowrie shaped as a perfect hexagon, a mossy grey stone, and a sparkling ball of fluff that had no clear outline and seemed like a tiny cloud. The woman looked up at him.

The tragedy of his failure to photograph the trader overwhelmed Tyler, the adolescent sense of ethics that kept his phone always in his pocket. A month ago, it had seemed very adult. Yet now he had nothing to help him remember the person herself. But he won't take a photo without her permission.

"I want a different trade today," he said. "I want your picture." Tyler picked up the miniature painting, pointed at it. "A picture of you." The woman frowned and leaned back. "How?" she said. Tyler took out his phone, snapped a selfie, then showed her the screen. The woman barked out a laugh, raised her eyes to his. "What you trade?" she asked.

Tyler glanced at the machine parts, then got a better idea. He rushed over to a stack of moving boxes, checked the labels, and pulled out one near the bottom. Grabbing a box cutter from the next stack, he slit the tape, folded back the flaps and rooted inside. He returned to his place on the floor with a battered shoebox. Tossing the lid and the box cutter aside, he dumped the contents out at the woman's feet: hundreds of color snapshots taken by his parents and grandparents. There were parties, swimming in a lake, sailing in a bay, graduations, Christmases, Halloweens, and birthdays spanning nearly 50 years. In most of them, Alex and Danica were just kids. The woman looked down. Her eyes got misty, and she covered her mouth. Tyler scooped

up handfuls of snapshots. “These,” he said.

The woman’s hand drifted over the photos, as if just by touching them she could absorb their stories. She spoke softly, from a distant memory. “Like me. Family. Before girl catch me.”

Tyler stared. “Girl catch you?” he asked. The woman nodded.

“How old were you?”

The woman thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Child.”

Tyler rubbed his face. He wanted to scream, to punch a wall, punch something. He looked across at the woman. “How many do you want?”

“One. This one.” She lifted a faded photo of a baby girl in her mother’s arms. Tyler knew it was his grandmother holding the infant Danica. “I will trade.”

Tyler was breathing hard. He had expected her to refuse. “Okay.” He scooted over to sit close to the trader, set up the camera app, and put an arm around her shoulders. He held the phone at arm’s length and began shooting a selfie video: the two of them side by side. He told the story of the impossible girl who came through the small door on July sixth, again on August third, and again today. He described the trades. He confessed his lies.

He wanted the trader to introduce herself. “What’s your name?”

“Luhdhali,” she says.

“No, that’s not your name. What’s the name your mother gave you?”

The woman paused. “No remember,” she said.

“Then I’ll give you a name now. Danica. You’re Danica.”

“Danica,” she said. “What mean?”

“I don’t know, but it’s my mother’s name.” He pointed to the two people in the faded photo. “This is my mother, Danica, when she was a baby. And that’s her mother holding her.” The woman’s face was full of wonder. She placed a hand on Tyler’s shoulder and pressed the old photo to her cheek.

Tyler broke away and slipped the phone into his pocket. “I want you to meet her. Stay here!” He rushed up the stairs, scattering the snapshots across the floor. Wiping his eyes, he ran out the back door to the garage. “DAD!” he yelled. His father dropped his tools in a panic. “What? You okay? Were you crying?”

Tyler only paused for breath. “Come inside.”

“Should I call 9-1-1?”

“Don’t call 9-1-1! Nobody’s hurt, okay? You’ll understand once we’re inside. Right now!” And Tyler dashed back to the house. Alex trotted after his son.

Tyler raced into Danica’s office, interrupting an Instagram post. “Mom, you gotta come with me!” He grabbed Danica’s hand and pulled her out of her chair and into the den before she could react. “Tyler, what...? What’s going on?”

They met Alex in the kitchen. Tyler barked one command. “Downstairs.” He dragged his mom down the steps. Alex followed, asking about burst pipes.

This was the moment their old lives ended. No one noticed that the front door was open.

Pounding down the stairs, Tyler called out, “These are my...” but the words died on his lips. There was no one else in the basement. Danica and Alex crowded behind him, both looking around for the source of their son’s excitement. Tyler could only focus on one thing: the severed harness on the floor, tied to the long rope. The rope snaked along the floor to the small door, where it now merged smoothly with the wall like a tree branch growing out of a sapling. Tyler turned around, saw the box cutter on the bottom step.

The woman’s trade goods were still arrayed on the floor. The round ball of fluff sparkled.

“Tyler, what are these things?” said Alex.

Tyler looked hard at his parents and his tears came in a flood. Danica reached for him but he pushed her away. “Okay,” he said. “We should sit down.” And he sat in the spot the trader usually occupied. Alex and Danica slowly sat down to face him.

They watched the video on Tyler’s phone many times.

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The house at 65 Fieldstone Drive has a cheerful red front door with brass hardware and leaded glass sidelights. It offers just over 3000 square feet, two and a half bathrooms, and upgraded, high-efficiency heating. Printed flyers showing a floor plan, photos, and the realtor’s contact information are available in a plastic holder on the porch.

The house is a great listing because it’s currently unoccupied; the Burkes now live just two blocks from their former address on Dobson Place. Tyler is delighted to be back in his old school and just a ten-minute walk from Bold Wombat Comics & Games. He hugs his parents first thing every morning, and again just before going to bed, and sometimes for no reason at all. Special bonus: a few days ago, Megan Tierney sent Tyler a message on the Kena: Bridge of Spirits discussion board. Does he know how to solve the fishing shrine puzzle? As it so happens,

he does.

The basement at 65 Fieldstone Drive still has piles of old doors, none of which lead anywhere. Though one door, the small door, has a story. It is shared among only four people. One of them, a woman with grey hair and different-colored eyes, is currently traveling in parts unknown.