



## Down the Road -- Part 11: Doorways

Three of a kind...

Phyllo stood before the three doors. The first one was marked the coward. The second one was marked the adventurer. The last one was marked the wanderer.

The first door...

"What's it going to be Tony?" asked one of the three boys. Tony looked up from his papers at the three youths staring at him impatiently.

"What are my choices again?" asked Tony sheepishly.

They all let out a sigh. One threw up his hands. Another rolled his eyes. "It's not about choices. It's about making decisions. I could give you a list of choices but if you want to sit at this table you're going to have to make decisions," said one of them from behind a cardboard screen. Pictured on the screen was a red dragon perched on a sea of golden coins. It loomed ferociously over a minuscule knight with his sword and shield raised in an epic struggle. Tony try to envision the room. He was having a hard time focusing on the game. Michelle Romy was crossing through the lunchroom. She never crossed through the lunchroom alone, until today. She had stickers of dark fairies all over her book covers. She wore green eyeshadow even when it didn't fit her outfit. An old pair of worn-out Mary Jane's made a clumping sound on the linoleum floor that Tony could recognize anywhere. It always put a pit in his stomach. He thought about the cool chat in English class earlier today.

She was really excited about seeing Robert Downey Jr. in that new comic book movie. "It's supposed to be better than the first one," said Tony.

"You like Sandman?" asked Michelle.

"Yeah, I really enjoyed the first movie *Game of You*," said Tony.

Here he was, a few hours later, sitting around with his friends playing *Mazes and Monsters*. He had his parents' Buick Skyhawk in the school parking lot. He even had enough cash in his pocket to buy the tickets and maybe a burger afterward. The golden moment in time was walking right past him. He looked back over at his friends. Two of them were staring at him, the other was smiling wolfishly. "So what are you going to do?" said the dungeon master from behind his throne of cardboard.

"Dude, why the hell aren't you going after her?" said the kid with the wolfish smile. He pulled out a pack of Marlboro smokes and began tapping the box against his hand nervously. He looked around to see if any teachers saw. He thought of taking one out smoking it right there but put the pack away.

"I'm going to search the room for traps and hidden passages," said Tony. Tony picked up his lucky 20 sided die and rolled it on the table.

"Chicken shit," said the boy with the pack of smokes.

"Shut up," answered Tony.

Door on the end...

"I'll be home late tonight, honey. I just gotta get a few things down on paper. No no, I'll be fine. Harriet has put a call out for some Chinese. Yeah, it's going to be a late-night," lied Mark Simon over his cell phone. He strained and bobbed his head around looking down the side streets. Once the phone was off, he debated about going to the strip bar. A young man on the corner wearing red desperately tried to make eye contact and flipped up gang signs. Mark wasn't in the mood for a bump of coke right now. *Maybe a little bit later when he wanted to get up one more time before heading back home*, he thought as he rounded the corner from Oak Point Avenue on to Bryant Avenue, a woman on the corner was flashing men her saggy breasts. She covered them quickly with her Brooklyn Dodgers starter jacket. She didn't look like she had any teeth left in her head. Her body twitched and convulsed with crack jitters. Mark kept going. He was looking for something just a little bit more high class. Every one in Hunt's Point knew when a clean-cut man was driving slowly through town it meant money. He turned his Excelsior dragon at the corner.

A young pretty thing caught Mark's eye. She looked like a refugee from a third-world village that held raves every night. Her lipstick and eyeshadow were smeared to make her look like a cross between a clown and a raccoon. On her back were angel wings like something from a Victoria's Secret ad. She was wearing not much more than lingerie. She made eye contact with Mark, turning and walking down an alley. Mark saw an open free parking spot along the street. He could just pull over into that spot down the alley and get his cock sucked right now. It would be the perfect start to a wonderful evening of late-night work.

That was just it. It was too perfect. The girl was too hot and it was too early in the evening. Mark rounded the corner and looked around for the unmarked police vehicles. *Better to get a feel for the neighborhood tonight first*, he thought.

Mark's adventures didn't take him down that road and Tony's decision not to pursue Michelle didn't lead him down the road either.

The Door in the Middle, the Wanderer...

"Where are you going, Mr. Gardner?" said the police officer. He was rolling his squad car at barely idle speed alongside a dusty little trail in Silver City, New Mexico. The old man still in his bathrobe didn't answer. The squad car pulled ahead of him and blocked his path. Two officers got out of the vehicle. "Rusty, what are you doing?" asked one of the officers.

"I was preparing to subdue the suspect," said the younger officer nervously.

"Rusty, if you don't put that can of pepper spray right back in your holster, I'm going to insert my nightstick past the handle and twist," said the older officer. He had a downright sarcastic tone. He was getting rather tired of young officer Rusty. This was Silver City, New Mexico. There was domestic violence and meth dealers for sure. Even the occasional homicide or kidnapping. Mostly it was a lot of old folks not wanting to live in the hustle and bustle of Phoenix. A place where old folks watched nature and dried up like the tumbleweeds. Mr. Gardner's travels were a monthly occasion. It didn't take long to

spot him. He usually took off in the middle of the night still wearing his pajamas. This time he managed to get a full 2 miles away from the nursing home. Officer Dingle, was genuinely impressed. He liked the old man. Picking him up and giving him a ride back to Sunny Center Retirement Village was usually a pretty uneventful waste of a few hours. It felt, to him, like rescuing a kitten from a tree. It seemed so much more like the kind of police work he wanted when he signed up for the job. So much better than when he had to take three kids into child services because their mom was running a brothel upstairs and a day care downstairs for the other working girls. Especially sad because he dated her in high school. With gas prices over four dollars and the cutbacks in jobs and welfare benefits he didn't blame her. The law is a law even if it sucks eggs. He reached out with one hand and took Mr. Gardner by his arm. "This way, Mr. Gardner," said Officer Dingle.

Meanwhile...

Alice looked away from the peephole over at Penelope still lying naked on the bed. Alice made a motion for Penelope to put some clothes on even as she started putting clothes on herself. She didn't want to look away from the peephole. The map keeper's face still loomed distorted through the fisheye lens. The distorted figures of 2 men came up alongside the preacher. They wore red robes and had faces covered in masks. The masks were split down the middle with one half smiling and the other half frowning, neither expression looking pleasant. The three faces pressed against each other. Back into the peephole. The map keeper held up the stump of his hand and rotated it before the peep hole. "You owe me something little girl! I know what that thing you carry is. And you're going to make a sacrifice for what you've done!" exclaimed the map keeper.

Alice took a step back from the door and it chattered on its hinges as she took her weight off it. Alice could hear both of them pounding against it as the two girls frantically searched for their clothes. The metal door frame didn't give. Penelope was searching for her jeans. Suddenly the banging stopped. Partially clothed, the two ladies looked at the door. The door began to sweat. They could hear a faint crackling sound like potato chips being eaten. The edges of the door began to peel back. A red gloved hand slipped inside and began to run its fingers over the wooden door. The fingers were shaping the door like clay. As the door warped, it stayed in one piece even though it sounded like it was breaking. The two girls stood transfixed, watching the odd sight. It dawned on Alice. "That's how they exchange flesh. They just peel it with their hands," she said aloud. She glanced over in the bathroom where Penelope's wet pants still hung. The door was almost peeled open. The inorganic lock held it in place. For Alice to get to the bathroom she would have to cross within reaching distance of those red-gloved hands. She looked over at the window still open from the night before. Penelope, eyeing her wet clothing, tried to make a run for it. Alice grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her towards the window. Bottomless Penelope try to protest but Alice was already clutching the knife from the nightstand. "Run... Run!" commanded Alice.

Alice walked towards the peeling door. It now resembled a piece of fried chicken skin being peeled away. The map keeper's face loomed through the opening gap. Alice walked close enough for him to reach her. She struck at his face with the knife. It was just a scratch, but it was enough. He stepped back clutching his face. "I'll have them stick your nose on your anus you filthy cunt!" screamed the map keeper. One of the men in red robes stopped working on the door. He immediately began to peel away the map keeper's face to the stop the ice water blood from flowing to his heart. They had to remove much of he face but it was like catching water with bare hands. Alice turned and ran towards the window looking down she saw Penelope sprawled out one story below bottomless and bleeding.

Silver City, New Mexico...

"There you go, Mr. Gardner. Nice and safe back here where you belong," said Officer Dingle. He actually helped Mr. Gardner back into bed. "Well that ends an exciting evening. Can I buy you a drink, Miss Sally?" he said turning to the RN.

"Sure," said a pretty young blonde who was a few pounds overweight and missing one of her eye teeth. Her flaws didn't take away from her beauty, I just made her more human and fragile. Her ex-husband took away that tooth from her.

Samuel Dingle still remembered the night. "An eye for an eye in the tooth for a tooth," he said as he took his nightstick across Sally's ex-husband's face for coming back to Silver City. That tooth is still out there somewhere in the desert or maybe it's underneath that goddamn road they keep building. Seventy cents later, Samuel was holding two hot cups of instant vending machine coffee. Sally took hers gratefully and glanced over at the heart monitor station. With a few routine and almost imperceptible head motions she managed to check the halls and every indicator.

Mrs. Rutherford in 10B began her nightly wail, "I'm dying... I'm dying... I'm dying..." It was a monotonous drone that kept in asynchronous rhythm with the beeping monitors. A cacophony of ever approaching death that was the ambient soundtrack of Sally's life. She was 22 and had three kids, one ex-husband, and her friends were only around when she had beer. The one man really cared for her with a 55 year old grizzled cop that had once dated her mother.

They sat and enjoyed the moment of quiet before the inevitable happened. "So, heard from your mom?" asked Samuel.

"She blew through town claiming she found Jesus. Borrowed 20 bucks off me and then hit the bar, that was last I heard. That was a month ago, and, you've seen me twice since then. Just give up on her. I have. It's simpler that way," said Sally. She sipped the bitter coffee.

"That road they're building is getting close isn't it?" said Samuel.

"Next month they will be transferring the patients to local facilities. Management said they were going to do job placement for the full-time employees."

"Well that's good."

She sipped her coffee again, "It would be if I was a full-time employee. The only one on staff who is on full-time is Reggie."

"Isn't he the guy that tried to..."

"Yeah, in the broom closet. They got him a job as a night manager at a McDonald's." A faint smile curled at the edge of her lips. It wasn't much for her to smile about, he was getting a job and she was losing hers. "Do you really think that thing is going fix our problems?"

"That's what they say. A massive superhighway project like that's bound to create some kind of jobs around here. Something has to," said Samuel. He walked over towards the window, he could see

floodlights of the construction crew working day and night building the road. The road completely separated his district. Worse yet there weren't any plans for an off ramp in Silver City. Most of the talk about the road was pretty quiet. They never even discussed it in town meetings on public access. Samuel thought about how he would never be caught dead watching public access and when he was younger. Now he sits around like an old man at a doughnut shop, reading the newspaper pretending he's not alone.

"What about Wade?" asked Samuel. "He's not bugging you still. Is he? Didn't he used to do road work?" said Samuel.

"Yes, he used to drive an asphalt truck but they aren't hiring any locals."

"Have you ever heard of a highway project not hiring any local asphalt companies?" said Samuel. He worked for the Sheriff's department and not the Highway Patrol so it wasn't his jurisdiction.

His radio squawked, "Sam... I mean Officer Dingle... Sir..."

"Rusty, I'm almost done here. What'd you need?" said Officer Dingle.

"There is a kid out here."

"Is he with his parents?" said Dingle with the patient tone.

"No, he says he's here to see his grandfather."

"Get his personal info and we'll drive him back to his parent's place. Sounds like another domestic situation, hopefully it's nothing too serious," said Dingle. The serious runaways don't run up to cops and ask to get into nursing homes in the middle of the night. He tried to drink the last of his coffee but his radio interrupted him.

"He says I'm not supposed to stop him. I think he's right. He knows things. I'm gonna be in the squad car." Rusty had a distant faraway sound.

"Deputy Russell you take that kid in custody. I'm going to be outside very shortly."

Pitching the half drunk cup of coffee, Samuel started towards the front door. He was stopped by a 4-foot-tall child with blonde hair and a wispy white complexion. The child looked up with unnaturally large eyes that stopped Samuel dead in his tracks.

The escape..,

Alice saw the twisted ledge where Penelope fell from. She spotted her sweatshirt underneath the desk and grabbed it, but it didn't make it over her head as she climbed out the window. She wasn't as far removed from climbing trees as Penelope was. She managed to get herself down with only a few cuts. She walked over and knelt beside Penelope. She turned her slightly and saw that her scalp was cut, but her head didn't seem busted. There were some pretty nasty bruises and cuts along her legs. It looked like she came down mostly on the back of her legs before striking her head against the ground. Alice gently shook her awake. Penelope's eyes were bleary and unfocused. She was muttering something but Alice knew they didn't have time. Injured or not, she needed to move now or else things were going to get a lot worse. She pulled Penelope to her feet and proceeded to walk her like a toy across the street to an alley.

Alice was relieved when Penelope started to pick up the pace and take up some of the weight on her own. "I'm sorry, I slipped," she said with a weak childish voice.

"We gotta find somewhere to hide now," said Alice. It was more to herself. Penelope was barely conscious. The alley exited onto another street and Alice spotted a dragon feeding station. The door to the restroom was on the side of the building. The streets were strangely quiet. Alice was very happy not to see anyone because Penelope was still naked from the waist down. When she reached the door to turn the handle and cried out in frustration. It was locked.

The reluctant traveler...

"You just sit here, son. I'm going to call up some people in there, then I'll come over there and ask you some questions. You just answer the questions honestly and correctly, everything's going to be okay," said Officer Dingle. He said this while holding the phone. The little boy with blonde hair sat in office chair spinning himself around in circles. He had a goofy grin on his face.

"So you like the Baltimore Orioles? I'm more of a St. Louis Cardinals fan myself. Are you from Baltimore?" said Sally in that condescending tone parents think works on children. She was referring to the oversized Baltimore orioles jersey the little boy wore over his jeans. "Why don't you take that jacket off. Must be warm."

"I think the situation is weird enough. I'm here to see Mr. Gardner. Don't worry, he didn't touch her children. But if you stayed with him he would have killed you. I'm sorry, but your mother will be dead next week. Drunk driving," said the little boy. He didn't stop spinning himself in the chair.

Sally's face rapidly cycled between shock, fear, confusion, then pure anger, "What are you talking about you little SHIT!" shouted Sally. She stopped him in the chair, tried to stare in his eyes as they spun around in his head.

Samuel Dingle pulled Sally off the little boy in the chair. He held her in his arms as they both stared at the boy. "You do have one choice remaining. If you sleep with him you'll regret it at first but eventually be happy. Your kids will forgive. Officer Dingle, you're an honest man and I wish you the best, but please stop taking men out into the desert and beating them senseless. You're going to get caught," said the little boy. Dingle smacked the little boy out of the chair. He was raging against the truth. He turned and looked at Sally. Ashamed that he couldn't be honest with himself about how he thought of her. She looked back at him frightened at the monster that would hit a child. They saw each other for who they really were. When they came back to themselves the little boy was walking down the hall towards Mr. Gardner's room.

Desperate times...

Alice, hiding the still blurry half naked Penelope, walked up to the front door of a house. "Why did she have to be half naked. I can't walk down the street with a girl bleeding from the head, let alone a girl bleeding from the head without pants. People seem to notice that kind of thing. Great idea Alice, let's wash denim and hang them out to dry. They dry real quick," said Alice to herself.

She rang the doorbell twice. Three times. She banged on the door with her fist. Looking around to see if anyone was noticing. The streets again were oddly quiet. Sitting on the porch was one of those

weird urns on top of a pedestal. She thought about using it, but realized the thing would be too heavy for her purposes. A small clay flowerpot worked nicely. She smashed the window next to the door and gently reached in feeling for the lock. Once the door was open, she collected Penelope and they entered the house.

"Damnit, they're all too small," said Alice. She left Penelope sitting on the steps as she dug through the drawers searching for clothes. She was now just dizzy. The blood loss had slowed quite a bit. Alice located pair of pants that would be baggy on Penelope but at least cover her butt. She found a sewing kit and went to work on Penelope's head. She had seen stitches in flesh before. She tried not to think of the man in the bordello. They were crooked stitches, but they closed the wound. The skin broke underneath one of the stitches. Thankfully the bleeding had stopped. Alice helped Penelope down the stairs and sat her down at a kitchen table.

"We need to get going, honey. Who ever owns this place could come back any minute," said Penelope. It was the first really coherent thought she had. She still looked extremely pale to Alice's eyes. Alice opened the door on the refrigerator and saw just what she needed. It was a large golden bottle of orange juice. A brick of pre-sliced cheese, some lunch meat, and some apples. There was even a plastic bag for her to put all the stuff in. She knew it wouldn't keep but it was the kind of food Penelope needed. She handed over a bottle of orange juice to Penelope and told her "Drink as much as you can.". Penelope spat it up at first, but then slowed her self. The change was immediate. Alice could start to see some color returned to her face. She was still worried about that cut on her head.

As they exited the front door and Penelope stopped Alice. "Do you hear that?" said Penelope grabbing Alice's arm. Alice could hear a faint engine noise. Poking her head around Penelope saw a car entering the driveway and rolling into the garage. The noise was the automatic door opener. As a car slipped inside they attempted to make their escape. Penelope was starting to feel better. Her blood sugar was kicking and she took the lead. Penelope was halfway across the lawn before she realized Alice had stopped. She turned around and saw Alice standing in front of that God damn urn.

"What is the sacrifice the hangman refused to make? What is the sacrifice this town has made to stay whole?" asked Alice to herself.

"Come on, before we get caught," protested Penelope with desperation in her voice.

The sacrifice...

Alice walked over and lifted the lid on the urn. She had seen horrible things. She had thought she had seen the worst humanity ever could offer. Inside the jar a tiny blue eye stared out. A little translucent foot, that was ready for a knitted little booty, floated in a red feminine broth. It had been sitting out for days in the congealed fluid. A black moss was growing around the edges where they met the porcelain jar.

Alice couldn't take in the sight. She had seen what happened when someone lost her child. But why would they keep it in a jar? She looked up and down the street. Each house had a jar. They all had jars. Resting the lid back in place, she turned and looked at the house. There a woman with gray streaks in her hair stood defiantly. One of her eyes was a smooth vacant socket, obviously taken by the dark wind. She was staring at her as her teenage daughter stood behind her. "Alice, we need to run. Come on let's go!" commanded Penelope.

"This town, isn't touched by the dark wind is it?" shouted Alice at the old woman and her teenage daughter.

"You're the one who altered the sacrifice. What right do you have to judge our town, heretic whore?" said the woman.

Alice looked around again and started to see things for the first time. The buildings in the town hadn't been touched by age because they were dead. The grass sprouting up to the cracks in the road told a different tale. This world hadn't been touched by the ravages of time. They had stopped the entropy in its tracks and defied the cycle of life by feeding it its youth. The old woman couldn't have created the sacrifice. When Alice looked at the teenage girl, her eyes dropped away knowingly. The sacrifice was created by her daughter. Alice pulled the cold knife a dull letter opener unremarkable in any way. Cold radiated from her body and she left icy footprints in her wake as she stepped towards the old woman. Her breath passed from her lips like a wolf breathing in winter.

"Don't!" shouted Penelope. Her body was half turned to runaway from Alice. She knew if she did this Penelope would leave forever. The choice wasn't in hers to make, it was the road guides and their whispering was already echoing in her head.

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