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Peril

by

J. R. Alfieri

Every year in the tiny village of Wetfoot there opened a door. The door itself, quite magically, had been built into the base of a magnificent willow tree, which rose in the heart of Wetfoot, surrounded by cobblestone walkways and rickety forges—a forgotten isle of green amidst a sea of stone. The townsfolk, or the Wetfeet as they're called, rarely spared the willow any appreciation. What the Wetfeet seemed to treasure more were the metal offspring born from their forges and the golden draughts born from their alehouses. But what they didn't treasure at all, what they in fact detested with all of their hearts, was the door and the day on which the door opened.

September 22nd, the Fall Equinox, or as they so keenly referred to it, the Day of Peril. They called it as such namely on account of the door, and more specifically on account of what the door opened up on. Or perhaps it should be said, on account of *where* the door opened up on.

You see, the willow's magnificence owed itself not to its exterior—which, like all willows, looked as if it were languidly melting—but to its interior. For inside the tree you would not find bark or termites or rings on a stump, you would find a wide expanse where hills rolled and trees

marched, where stars shone and rafts of the whitest clouds you ever saw sailed. And if the Wetfeet could be believed, there in that world inside the willow, you would also find your peril.

Once, long, long ago, the Wetfeet knew it as the Perilous Realm, but somewhere along the way, likely in the fires of the forges and the bubbles of the ale, that name had been lost. Now the Wetfeet know it only as the Land of Peril, which could be accessed once a year when all the sundials and pocket watches declared it the Day of Peril, by entering a door built into the wooden face of what surprisingly wasn't called the Tree of Peril.

As it were, our story begins on the eve of September 22nd, inside a cottage on the outskirts of Wetfoot, under a thatched roof, around a trestle table, at a standstill moment between father, Brutus, and son, Faerwald (Faer for short).

Brutus had just tucked his pocket watch back into his waistcoat when he said, "Couple more ticks and that dratted ole tree'll crack open its door. What needs to crack instead 'er its root, and I say we oughtta be the ones to do it! Blasted eyesore is long overdue fer a felling!"

"As are you," Faer whispered quietly,

but apparently not quiet enough. For his father heard and fixed him with a stare, his eyes afire.

Thus the standstill moment.

“What did you just say to me, boy?”

Silence came crashing into the room, then only the sound of Faer shifting uncomfortably in his seat. At last he spoke, and as he did so he softened his voice and nodded to the pewter mug clasped in his father’s hand. “I meant only that you’ve had a thirst tonight, sir.” Like his quiet whisper that wasn’t quiet enough, his soft voice too must not have been soft enough, as Brutus clamored his free fist onto the table shouting,

“Insolent dog! How dare ye speak to me in such a manner! Me! The man who puts a roof over yer head, food in yer belly and clothes on yer back! I give thanks every night yer mother ain’t around to see the foul thing you’ve become!”

That last part settled over them with a weight Faer could physically feel. Under it his voice broke. “You give thanks Mother died?”

Brutus just looked at him, his eyes still aflame, kindled more now than ever before. “Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.”

And then that physical weight suddenly grew heavier, heavier and heavier still. Under it now Faer found trouble breathing. His voice not only broke, but his heart did too.

Fighting against tears, he rose up from the table and managed to say, “Then I will relieve you of it,” before storming out of the cottage and into the night.

The very instant he left home was also the very instant he lost the fight against his tears. Faer moved out and away from his

father without thinking about where or even in what direction he was going. Because right now “away” was the only destination that mattered and “out” was the only direction that could take him there.

Faer let his legs carry him under the drifting smog of Wetfoot, sniffing and slouched and slumped. Had his father been correct in calling him a dog, his tail would have been hooked between his legs and his ears would have been flushed back against his head.

On his walk through town Faer passed not a single soul—a phenomenon he rightfully accredited to the deepening night, the near approach of the Fall Equinox, the Day of Peril rounding the corner. Once the clock tower bell struck midnight, all would bar their doors, pull their families close and hope the sun would ride the sky without incident. Regardless of what this behavior implied, it should be said nothing ever came out of the willow door. Things only went into it. And so it’s worth noting that the Wetfeet locked their doors not to keep anything out, but to keep themselves and their families in.

With no door or family to contain him, Faer roamed the cobblestones searching for his destination, “away”. The closer he got to the center of town—for it was there his feet seemed to be taking him—the closer the houses hugged together. He slunk by one home in particular just as a woman was emptying her chamber pot out of her window.

The beef stew slopped against his leather boots, the only pair of footwear he owned, and, rather pitifully, a gift his late mother had handmade him.

It was then, dumped out and now defecated on by this horrid place, that the fog of his unconscious cleared and he willingly understood his destination, what “away” really meant. The willow tree, the

door, and beyond it the Land of Peril, for nothing could be worse than the peril he lived.

He stood buried beneath the shadow of the willow, casting his gaze upon the tree and mastering his fear, when that clock tower bell struck midnight. The peal of it echoed throughout the town and throughout his bloodstream. *DONG! DONG! DONG!* Almost like knocks, knocks, knocks on a willow door.

And sure enough the willow door answered the calling. Seemingly on its own accord, it cracked inward and gave way. Only a cleft, the slightest sliver, separated the door and its frame. In that manner the door still concealed what lay therein, yet also invited any traveler, any hand, to just push and come inside.

Faer raised his arm out towards it and, as if walking prudently on a tightrope, tiptoed closer, careful not to lose his balance, slip from the tightrope that was his reckless courage (which might just be heartbreak renamed) and fall into the chasm of fear below.

Down there childhood stories swirled and echoed through his memory. Flashes of the past blazed across his mind. He suddenly unearthed all his knowledge on the willow door and the Land of Peril.

"Promise me you won't ever, ever, go open that door," his mother said to him, her bluebell eyes overflowing with maternal concern. "Promise me, Faerwald. Swear on your very life."

"I promise."

"Let me hear you say it."

"I swear on my very life I won't ever, ever go open that door."

And here now with his arm extended, Faer motioned forward. One step closer to forsaking himself and that long-ago promise. Then another skein of his memory

unspooled.

An elderly woman pounding at the willow door, begging it to open, shouting after her lost son, and throwing all of her weight into the trunk, leaves showering all around her, falling lifelessly, hopelessly, then her falling with them, down on her knees sobbing, reaching up, and in one final effort slapping an open palm against the grooved bark of the willow and whispering, "Please, please give me my Jacob back."

And later that night Brutus cursing at the tree, at the door that will only yield when the days and nights stretch to equal lengths, the Equinox, then Faer's mother demanding he renew his vow.

"Let me hear you say it."

"I swear on my very life I won't ever, ever go open that door."

Years later, Faer bit back on the memory. He shook his head to shake it out of consciousness, but instead only repositioned another memory on top, this one a fresh wound still bleeding.

"Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to."

Feet planted firm, spine straight and eyes ahead, Faer landed on the other side of the tightrope, having bridged his fear, and found himself face to face with the willow.

"I won't ever, ever go open that door."

He went and he opened that door.

So easily it relented beneath his touch. Under the lightest amount of pressure, the door folded in. A floating veil of darkness, sheer darkness, greeted him, complete and utterly opaque, yet not a void, not empty. Faer felt that the instant he beheld the threshold.

And the instant he crossed it, his feeling proved true, for the darkness melted away.

Above him sprawled a night's sky,

dominated by a pregnant moon and its abounding litter of stars. Below him spanned an army of bladed grass, all the individual soldiers bowing down to the breeze that souged through. In front of him loomed a great forest, its trees coiled and braided, like how his mother used to style her hair. And firm behind him stood the willow, the door still open should he change his mind and seek to return.

Nothing about this land evoked in Faer a sense of peril, as its given name might suggest and as Wetfoot so often did. Returning held no place in his mind, only exploring.

“Hello!” Faer called out into the realm. The feeling that this wasn’t a void, wasn’t empty, hadn’t left him in the threshold. “Can anyone hear me? My name is Faerwald and I’ve come from the tree!”

Just then he heard a snicker, inside the forest her heard something snickering at him. When the merriment died out, a disembodied voice floated back under the moonlight, over the sea of grass,

“Of course you came from the tree! Where else? We all come from the tree!”

Faer welcomed a moment of contemplation, more or less a moment of uncertainty on how to disentangle both the presence of the untethered voice and its rather strange claim, before responding.

“Whatever do you mean, ‘We all come from the tree’? The other children who have ventured in and never out again, is it them you reference?”

“Children?” the voice tasted this word and seemed dissatisfied by it. “Seldom they! Adults more than children, I reckon. But that’s plenty talk now! Won’t you do what you’ve come for? Or have you come for what you won’t do?”

“Pardon?” Faer said, not bothering to waste any time disentangling that. When the voice fell silent, he struck out towards it,

determined on locating its origin. And by so doing he unknowingly answered its question.

Once he reached the tree line he halted. Over his shoulder he glanced back at the willow door, his exit, then he corrected his neck and glanced forward at the many avenues cut between the timber pillars. “Apologies, I didn’t quite catch that last bit! What is it you said?”

“Oh nothing!” the voice volleyed. “Won’t you enter the forest, Faerwald?”

“And why should I?”

“Because it is ahead of you.”

“That is no reason—” Faer started but never finished.

“That is *all* the reason, dear boy! What’s behind you is behind you because you put it behind! What’s ahead of you is ahead of you because you put it ahead! Do your heels not agree? Do your toes not concur? Enter the forest, Faerwald. If you should like what’s behind you to stay there, enter the forest!”

Faer dropped his gaze. Stained dry on his boots he saw the chunky chamber pot stew, and beneath it the leather his mother had gifted him.

“Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.”

He entered the forest.

From the depths soon arrived a man, a brilliant man the likes of which Faer had never before seen. In his eyes shimmered what could have only been starlight, reflected not from the ice shards twinkling above, but from the deep recesses of his soul. Though strongest in his eyes, this light emanated through, or *from*, every inch of him. His skin, his hair, his garments all emitted an angelic glow. His translucent being in turn made him appear porous, half-present.

When this man witnessed Faer's reaction to him—a dumbfound expression that spread across his face like a wave, widening his eyebrows and disengaging his lower jaw—he let out another snicker.

“Have you any idea where you are, Faerwald?”

“Not the faintest,” Faer frowned. “Can you tell me what this place is?”

The man shook his head. “Afraid not, but I can show you to someone who can. Someone with an answer to that question and more.”

“But what if I don't have any more questions to ask?”

The man broke a smile. In his eyes the light pulsed, an excited heartbeat. “I think, dear Faerwald, once you see this particular someone, you will have a world of questions to ask.” He turned on a swivel. Under twisted boughs arching above, beneath the starlight sieving through the forest roof, he began trekking into the depths from which he came.

Faer followed. Leaves crunched underfoot, twigs snapped and the child's voice peeped, “I heard of people like you before.”

“Is that so?” the man asked, enticed and somewhat amused.

“Back home, we even have a name for your kind. Fairies, or the Fae. My mother read me all the stories. I know Puck and Morgan and—”

“Yes, I am sure you could go on. I know them as well, for I too had a mother who enjoyed her letters. But that's all they were, all they are. Letters written on a page. Stale ink kept imprisoned in parchment. I am not a fairy. This is not Fairyland. My name is Jacob.”

Faer puckered his lips. Without realizing it he reinstated his question. “Then what is it? What are you?”

But the man kept to his word, and so

kept to silence. A few footfalls later, Faer spotted in the distance what he first mistook as an iris flower—its stem a hunchback man, its head a half-yawning explosion of deep indigo. It wasn't until he nearly stepped over this flower that he realized it wasn't an iris at all. It was a bluebell.

As they progressively infiltrated the wildness, sidestepping briar bushes and traversing groves where wild flowers grew, young Faer absorbed all of the evidence around him and with it made his ruling, his conviction:

This land did not deserve its name, the Land of Peril. Unravished by rackets, forges, ever-pouring alehouses and chimney stack smog, this land deserved only to be called the Land of Beauty. Even the inhibitor—who the land must have either begotten, or who had himself begotten the land—greatly (and quite literally) outshined the drunkards, abusive fathers, and careless chamber-pot disposers of Wetfoot, the real Land of Peril.

Not a full minute after Faer brought the gavel down on his conviction, he intercepted the soft *whoosh* of a running river. Soon the forest spat him and Jacob out onto a bankside, and there knee-deep in the water he beheld translucent men, woman, and children all swimming, all impossibly aglow, and all porous.

The water itself threw off a crystalline shimmer, as if those who were bathing in it were bathing in their life source. One by one they all caught sight of Faer and one by one they all froze. The river's surface settled and sprinted past as quiet as a midnight breeze.

“You've come,” a woman said as she waded through the current towards the bankside, towards Faer.

And it was then Jacob's prediction came true, “*Once you see this particular someone, you will have a world of questions to ask.*”

Indeed seeing her now, seeing the exact

shade of her eyes, a world of questions spun madly through Faer's mind. He swallowed dry spit and asked his first question, perhaps also the only question that mattered,

"Mother?"

She raised her arms out and returned his question with one of her own, a question slightly altered, however practically identical to the one the Jacob had not too long ago asked.

"Won't you come into the water, Faerwald?"

Because of its repetition and because of the woman's wide berth to his question, this marked the first instance Faer felt that something might be...off.

He retreated a step.

The light exuding from both the people and the river flickered then, like a candle buffeted by the wind, it flickered and for the briefest of moments even died out. All they amounted to in that split fraction of time were wraiths, silent shadows and still silhouettes, unyielding and unmoving in the river that only urged they do so.

"I don't understand. Father...he..."

"Buried my coffin, yes. But I was not in it. Like everyone here," she turned and presented those standing in the river behind her, the water tugging at their clothes, "I came from the willow door. Do you remember when I fell ill, Faerwald? How forgone I was in my final days? You were so young I am surprised you carry a memory of me at all."

Faer could only shake his head no. He didn't remember and always counted that a blessing.

"I contracted a disease so horrid, the local wise woman took one look at me, one sniff, and declared my doom. It was early autumn, then, and just as the leaves began to die, so did I. Bedridden I withered alongside the world. Death's door I knew would open and the Reaper I knew would shove me

through it. So after everyone came to my bedside and paid their respects, I decided to try my hand at another door.

"Your father initially opposed the idea, as any rational man of Wetfoot would. What goes into the willow does not ever come back out; all our lives we are warned of this. But is death not the same? I argued, and I don't think your father had it in him to deny my final wish. When the Equinox at last arrived, I couldn't even stand, too frail, too brittle. But your father, he picked me up and in his arms under that harvest moon of yore he took me there, to the tree.

"He despised it back then, before I ever left him for it he despised every branch, ever leaf, right down to the roots. I can't imagine how much he despises it now, after it stole me and never returned me. I might think he despises all the branches, all the leaves, no matter on what tree. I might think he despises the world.

"I suppose he kept it a secret all these years so that you wouldn't ever follow. Yet here you are."

This struck young Faer how a battering ram might strike castle gates. The world of questions that spun madly through his head halted abruptly. Just standing, breathing and being present exerted everything inside him, every ounce of strength, every reserve.

"Mother?"

She had waded through the current, advanced on the bankside, but yet wouldn't step foot on dry land. In ankle-deep water she tarried. "I am not her. Only what's left of her, what the current didn't whisk away." Then she gazed downriver, at a terminus beyond sight where the water, the light, flowed into a pool far greater. "So my boy it is time now I ask you, won't you do what you've come for? Or have you come for what you won't do?"

Faer shot a glance at Jacob, who then left him and joined the others in the water. "I

don't know what I've come for," he said. It tasted like a lie almost as much as it sounded like one.

"You do," his mother assured him. "You came here for the same reason we all came here. Escape. You ran away from the world and the problems within, *are* running away. But this, my Faerwald, is the end of the road." She nodded down at where the river water met the earth, only a few feet between her feet and his. "You can step into the water, into the light, and let the river bear you on. Or you can turn around now. The Equinox is still yet upon us. The willow door remains open. So which is it? Will you do what you've come for? Or have you come for what you won't do?"

So clearly Faer heard blazing through his mind, "*Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to.*" He felt the unbearable pain. He noted the short distance between him and the lingering trace of his mother. And he made his decision.

The motivation behind his choice, what ultimately decided whether or not he would surrender himself to the river—the real and everlasting escape—lay hidden in his father's scorn.

"Every night. Every day. Every time I look at yer green face, I give thanks yer mother and those beautiful bluebell eyes of hers no longer have to." And preceding that, *"I give thanks every night yer mother ain't around to see the foul thing you've become!"*

Green face. Foul thing. Although these disparagements could only be described as severely unwarranted, young Faer had no way of knowing that. In his life he lacked a variance of perspective, like, say, that of a mother's, and so developed his understanding of everything, including

himself, from the only man who bothered teaching him anything, his father.

Faer truly thought of himself as a "foul thing", unworthy of his father's praise, unworthy of even sharing a table with him (hence his leaving). Beholding his mother's glory, he could not bring himself now to enter the river as a failure, as this green-faced foul thing she wouldn't be proud of. He would go back. He would better himself, and when he finally gained his father's approval, maybe he would travel through the door again and let the river wash away his existence. Maybe, if at that time he still sought escape.

"Can't you come back with me?" he asked imploringly. "Any of you?"

"No," and in her voice she held no note of regret. "None of us can leave. We all made our choice, for one reason or another, we call committed ourselves. We aren't really here, Faerwald. There isn't enough of us to go back." As if intentionally punctuating this, the light enclosed within them all blinked off. Silent shadows and still silhouettes.

"Tell your father I found peace," she went on as light radiated once more. "Tell him I'm waiting and I'll see him soon. And if he wants to honor my memory, tell him he can do that by honoring you."

"But what if he doesn't believe me?" Faer protested. "How will he know this isn't all just in my head? How will *I* know?"

"There's a bluebell in these woods. Take it with you through the willow. Remember me by it. Your father knows how rare the flower is. Show him and he'll come around." She glimpsed up at the pregnant moon. "You should go now, Faerwald. Night here never ends, but time flows still. Much of it has past. You should go now."

In what felt like the most difficult motor function of his life, Faer turned his back on his mother. Clambering back up the

bankside, her heard the final whisper of her voice flutter out over the *whoosh* of the river.

“I’m proud of you, Faerwald. Facing the world and the problems within, escaping no more, remaining dry, I’m proud of you.” And then all the lights flicked off.

Tears followed young Faer through the forest. But when he plucked the bluebell flower, his tears ran dry, for in his hands he held something that inspired not sorrow, but hope.

From that day onward Faerwald, the first and only person to ever survive the Land of Peril, was considered a miracle by all the Wetfeet, and more than anyone else, by his father. He spread his knowledge about the tree and the luminescent river the tree

harbored. Henceforth, September 22nd was known as the Day of Light, and so too the magical realm was known as the Land of Light. The willow stood evermore at the heart of Wetfoot, and often the sick, the weary and the downtrodden passed through there. Once in a while runaway children seeking escape slipped by also, as the ugliness of the world was an indelible mark not even a miracle could efface.

In his later years when, like his mother, he himself relied on others to carry him—long after the color of his face changed from green to grey—Faer returned. With his bluebell clutched in his hand and with his loved ones sending him off, he at last did what he came for.

He entered the river.