



# The Witch Door, Ray Bradbury

## The Witch Door

It was a pounding on a door, a furious, frantic, insistent pounding, born of hysteria and fear and a great desire to be heard, to be freed, to be let loose, to escape.

It was a wrenching at hidden paneling, it was a hollow knocking, a rapping, a testing, a clawing! It was a scratching at hollow boards, a ripping at bedded nails; it was a muffled closet shouting and demanding, far away, and a call to be noticed, followed by a silence.

The silence was the most empty and terrible of all.  
Robert and Martha Webb sat up in bed.

“Did you hear it?”

“Yes, again.”

“Downstairs.”

Now whoever it was who had pounded and rapped and made his fingers raw, drawn blood with his fever and quest to be free, had drawn into silence, listening himself to see if his terror and drumming had summoned any help.

The winter night lay through the house with a falling-snow silence, silence snowing into every room, drifting over tables and floors, and banking up the stairwell.

Then the pounding started again. And then:

A sound of soft crying.

“Downstairs.”

“Someone in the house.”

“Lotte, do you think? The front door’s unlocked.”

“She’d have knocked. Can’t be Lotte.”

“She’s the only one it could be. She phoned.”

They both glanced at the phone. If you lifted the receiver, you heard a winter stillness. The phones were dead. They had died days ago with the riots in the nearest towns and cities. Now, in the receiver, you heard only your own heartbeat. "Can you put me up?" Lotte had cried from six hundred miles away. "Just overnight?"

But before they could answer her, the phone had filled itself with long miles of silence.

"Lotte is coming. She sounded hysterical. That might be her," said Martha Webb.

"No," said Robert. "I heard that crying other nights, too. Dear God."

They lay in the cold room in this farmhouse back in the Massachusetts wilderness, back from the main roads, away from the towns, near a bleak river and a black forest. It was the frozen middle of December. The white smell of snow cut the air.

They arose. With an oil lamp lit, they sat on the edge of the bed as if dangling their legs over a precipice.

"There's no one downstairs, there can't be."

"Whoever it is sounds frightened."

"We're all frightened, damn it. That's why we came out here, to be away from cities, riots, all that damned foolishness. No more wiretaps, arrests, taxes, neurotics. Now when we find it at last, people call and upset us. And tonight this, Christ!" He glanced at his wife. "You afraid?"

"I don't know. I don't believe in ghosts. This is 1999; I'm sane. Or like to think I am. Where's your gun?"

"We won't need it. Don't ask me why, but we won't."

They picked up their oil lamps. In another month the small power plant would be finished in the white barns behind the house and there'd be power to spare, but now they haunted the farm, coming and going with dim lamps or candles.

They stood at the stairwell, both thirty-three, both immensely practical. The crying, the sadness, and the plea came from below in the winter rooms.

“She sounds so damned sad,” said Robert. “God, I’m sorry for her, but don’t even know who it is. Come on.”

They went downstairs.

As if hearing their footsteps, the crying grew louder. There was a dull thudding against a hidden panel somewhere.

“The Witch Door!” said Martha Webb at last.

“Can’t be.”

“Is.”

They stood in the long hall looking at that place under the stairs, where the panels trembled faintly. But now the cries faded, as if the crier was exhausted, or something had diverted her, or perhaps their voices had startled her and she was listening for them to speak again. Now the winter-night house was silent and the man and wife waited with the oil lamps quietly fuming in their hands.

Robert Webb stepped to the Witch Door and touched it, probing for the hidden button, the secret spring. “There can’t be anyone in there,” he said. “My God, we’ve been here six months, and that’s just a cubby. Isn’t that what the Realtor said when he sold the place? No one could hide in there and us not know it. We—”

“Listen!”

They listened.

Nothing.

“She’s gone, it’s gone, whatever it was, hell, that door hasn’t been opened in our lifetime. Everyone’s forgotten where the spring is that unlocks it. I don’t think there is a door, only a loose panel, and rats’ nests, that’s all. The walls, scratching. Why not?” He turned to look at his wife, who was staring at the hidden place.

“Silly,” she said. “Good Lord, rats don’t cry. That was a voice, asking to be saved. Lotte, I thought. But now I know it wasn’t she, but someone else in as much trouble.”

Martha Webb reached out and trembled her fingertips along the beveled edge of ancient maple. “Can’t we open it?”

“With a crowbar and hammer, tomorrow.”

“Oh, Robert!”

“Don’t ‘Oh, Robert’ me. I’m tired.”

“You can’t leave her in there to—”

“She’s quiet now. Christ, I’m exhausted. I’ll come down at the crack of dawn and knock the damned thing apart, okay?”

“All right,” she said, and tears came to her eyes.

“Women,” said Robert Webb. “Oh, my God, you and Lotte, Lotte and you. If she is coming here, if she makes it, I’ll have a houseful of lunatics!”

“Lotte’s fine!”

“Sure, but she should keep her mouth shut. It doesn’t pay now to say you’re Socialist, Democrat, Libertarian, Pro-Life Abortionist, Sinn Fein Fascist, Commie, any damn thing. The towns are bombed out. People are looking for scapegoats and Lotte has to shoot from the hip, get herself smeared and now, hell, on the run.”

“They’ll jail her if they catch her. Or kill her, yes, kill her. We’re lucky to be here with our own food. Thank God we planned ahead, we saw it coming, the starvation, the massacres. We helped ourselves. Now we help Lotte if she makes it through.”

Without answering, he turned to the stairs. “I’m dead on my feet. I’m tired of saving anyone. Even Lotte. But hell, if she comes through the front door, she’s saved.”

They went up the stairs taking the lamps, advancing in an ever-moving aura of trembling white glow. The house was as silent as snow falling. "God," he whispered. "Damn, I don't like women crying like that."

It sounded like the whole world crying, he thought. The whole world dying and needing help and lonely, but what can you do? Live in a farm like this? Far off the main highway where people don't pass, away from all the stupidity and death? What can you do?

They left one of the lamps lit and drew the covers over their bodies and lay, listening to the wind hit the house and creak the beams and parquetry.

A moment later there was a cry from downstairs, a splintering crash, the sound of a door flung wide, a bursting out of air, footsteps rapping all the rooms, a sobbing, almost an exultation, then the front door banged open, the winter wind blowing wildly in, footsteps across the front porch and gone.

"There!" cried Martha. "Yes!"

With the lamp they were down the stairs swiftly. Wind smothered their faces as they turned now toward the Witch Door, opened wide, still on its hinges, then toward the front door where they cast their light out upon a snowing winter darkness and saw nothing but white and hills, no moon, and in the lamplight the soft drift and moth-flicker of snowflakes falling from the sky to the matted yard.

"Gone," she whispered.

"Who?"

"We'll never know, unless she comes back."

"She won't. Look."

They moved the lamplight toward the white earth and the tiny footprints going off, across the softness, toward the dark forest.

"It was a woman, then. But . . . why?"

"God knows. Why anything, now in this crazy world?"

They stood looking at the footprints a long while until, shivering, they moved back through the hall to the open Witch Door. They poked the lamp into this hollow under the stairs.

“Lord, it’s just a cell, hardly a closet, and look . . .”

Inside stood a small rocking chair, a braided rug, a used candle in a copper holder, and an old, worn Bible. The place smelled of must and moss and dead flowers.

“Is this where they used to hide people?”

“Yes. A long time back they hid people called witches. Trials, witch trials. They hanged or burned some.”

“Yes, yes,” they both murmured, staring into the incredibly small cell.

“And the witches hid here while the hunters searched the house and gave up and left?”

“Yes, oh, my God, yes,” he whispered.

“Rob . . .”

“Yes?”

She bent forward. Her face was pale and she could not look away from the small, worn rocking chair and the faded Bible.

“Rob. How old? This house, how old?”

“Maybe three hundred years.”

“That old?”

“Why?”

“Crazy. Stupid . . .”

“Crazy?”

“Houses, old like this. All the years. And more years and more after that. God, feel! If you put your hand in, yes? Would you feel it change, silly, and what if I sat in that rocking chair and shut the door, what? That woman . . . how long was she in there? How’d she get there? From way, way back. Wouldn’t it be strange?”

“Bull!”

“But if you wanted to run away badly enough, wished for it, prayed for it, and people ran after you, and someone hid you in a place like this, a witch behind a door, and heard the searchers run through the house, closer and closer, wouldn’t you want to get away? Anywhere? To another place? Why not another time? And then, in a house like this, a house so old nobody knows, if you wanted and asked for it enough, couldn’t you run to another year! Maybe”—she paused—“here . . . ?”

“No, no,” he muttered. “Really stupid!”

But still, some quiet motion within the closeted space caused both, at almost the same instant, to hold their hands out on the air, curious, like people testing invisible waters. The air seemed to move one way and then another, now warm, now cold, with a pulsation of light and a sudden turning toward dark. All this they thought but could not say.

There was weather here, now a quick touch of summer and then a winter cold, which could not be, of course, but there it was. Passing along their fingertips, but unseen by their eyes, a stream of shadows and sun ran as invisible as time itself, clear as crystal, but clouded by a shifting dark. Both felt if they thrust their hands deep, they might be drawn in to drown in a mighty storm of seasons within an incredibly small space. All this, too, they thought or almost felt but could not say.

They seized their frozen but sunburned hands back, to stare down and hold them against the panic in their breasts.

“Damn,” whispered Robert Webb. “Oh, damn!”

He backed off and went to open the front door again and look at the snowing night where the footprints had almost vanished.

“No,” he said. “No, no.”

Just then the yellow flash of headlights on the road braked in front of the house.

“Lotte!” cried Martha Webb. “It must be! Lotte!”



The car lights went out. They ran to meet the running woman half up the front yard.

“Lotte!”

The woman, wild-eyed, hair windblown, threw herself at them.

“Martha, Bob! God, I thought I’d never find you! Lost! I’m being followed, let’s get inside. Oh, I didn’t mean to get you up in the middle of the night, it’s good to see you! Jesus! Hide the car! Here are the keys!”

Robert Webb ran to drive the car behind the house. When he came back around he saw that the heavy snowfall was already covering the tracks.

Then the three of them were inside the house, talking, holding onto each other. Robert Webb kept glancing at the front door.

“I can’t thank you,” cried Lotte, huddled in a chair. “You’re at risk! I won’t stay long, a few hours until it’s safe. Then . . .”

“Stay as long as you want.”

“No. They’ll follow! In the cities, the fires, the murders, everyone starving, I stole gas. Do you have more? Enough to get me to Phil Merdith’s in Greenborough? I—”

“Lotte,” said Robert Webb.

“Yes?” Lotte stopped, breathless.

“Did you see anyone on your way up here? A woman? Running on the road?”

“What? I drove so fast! A woman? Yes! I almost hit her. Then she was gone! Why?”

“Well . . .”

“She’s not dangerous?”

“No, no.”

“It is all right, my being here?”

“Yes, fine, fine. Sit back. We’ll fix some coffee—”

“Wait! I’ll check!” And before they could stop her, Lotte ran to the front door, opened it a crack, and peered out. They stood with her and saw distant headlights flourished over a low hill and gone into a valley. “They’re coming,” whispered Lotte. “They might search here. God, where can I hide?”

Martha and Robert glanced at each other.

No, no, thought Robert Webb. God, no! Preposterous, unimaginable, fantastic, so damned coincidental the mind raves at it, crows, hoots, guffaws! No, none of this! Get off, circumstance! Get away with your goings and comings on not neat, or too neat, schedules.

Come back, Lotte, in ten years, five years, maybe a year, a month, a week, and ask to hide. Even tomorrow show up! But don’t come with coincidence in each hand like idiot children and ask, only half an hour after one terror, one miracle, to test our disbelief! I’m not, after all, Charles Dickens, to blink and let this pass.

“What’s wrong?” said Lotte.

“I—” said Robert.

“No place to hide me?”

“Yes,” he said. “We’ve a place.”

“Well?”

“Here.” He turned slowly away, stunned.

They walked down the hall to the half-open paneling.

“This?” Lotte said. “Secret? Did you—?”

“No, it’s been here since the house was built long ago.”

Lotte touched and moved the door on its hinges. “Does it work? Will they know where to look and find it?”

“No. It’s beautifully made. Shut, you can’t tell it’s there.”

Outside in the winter night, cars rushed, their beams flashing up the road, across the house windows.

Lotte peered into the Witch Door as one peers down a deep, lonely well.

A filtering of dust moved about her. The small rocking chair trembled. Moving in silently, Lotte touched the half-burned candle.

“Why, it’s still warm!”

Martha and Robert said nothing. They held to the Witch Door, smelling the odor of warm tallow.

Lotte stood rigidly in the little space, bowing her head beneath the beamed ceiling.

A horn blew in the snowing night. Lotte took a deep breath and said, “Shut the door.”

They shut the Witch Door. There was no way to tell that a door was there.

They blew out the lamp and stood in the cold, dark house, waiting.

The cars rushed down the road, their noise loud, and their yellow headlights bright in the falling snow. The wind stirred the footprints in the yard, one pair going out, another coming in, and the tracks of Lotte’s car fast vanishing, and at last gone.

“Thank God,” whispered Martha.

The cars, honking, whipped around the last bend and down the hill and stopped, waiting, looking in at the dark house. Then, at last, they started up away into the snow and the hills.

Soon their lights were gone and their sound gone with them.

“We were lucky,” said Robert Webb.

“But she’s not.”

“She?”

“That woman, whoever she was, ran out of here. They’ll find her. Somebody’ll find her.”

“Christ, that’s right.”

“And she has no ID, no proof of herself. And she doesn’t know what’s happened to her. And when she tells them who she is and where she came from!”

“Yes, yes.”

“God help her.”

They looked into the snowing night but saw nothing. Everything was still. “You can’t escape,” she said. “No matter what you do, no one can escape.”

They moved away from the window and down the hall to the Witch Door and touched it.

“Lotte,” they called.

The Witch Door did not tremble or move.

“Lotte, you can come out now.”

There was no answer; not a breath or a whisper.

Robert tapped the door. “Hey in there.”

“Lotte!”

He knocked at the paneling, his mouth agitated.

“Lotte!”

“Open it!”

“I’m trying, damn it!”

“Lotte, we’ll get you out, wait! Everything’s all right!”

He beat with both fists, cursing. Then he said, “Watch out!” took a step back, raised his leg, kicked once, twice, three times; vicious kicks at the paneling that crunched holes and crumbled wood into kindling. He reached in and yanked the entire paneling free. “Lotte!”

They leaned together into the small place under the stairs.

The candle flickered on the small table. The Bible was gone. The small rocking chair moved quietly back and forth, in little arcs, and then stood still.

“Lotte!”

They stared at the empty room. The candle flickered.

“Lotte,” they said.

“You don’t believe . . .”

“I don’t know. Old houses are old . . . old . . .”

“You think Lotte . . . she . . . ?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Then she’s safe at least, safe! Thank God!”

“Safe? Where’s she gone? You really think that? A woman in new clothes, red lipstick, high heels, short skirt, perfume, plucked brows, diamond rings, silk stockings, safe? Safe!” he said, staring deep into the open frame of the Witch Door.

“Yes, safe. Why not?”

He drew a deep breath.

“A woman of that description, lost in a town called Salem in the year 1680?”

He reached over and shut the Witch Door.

They sat waiting by it for the rest of the long, cold night.

The End