

**Behind the Door**  
By  
Kathy Fischer-Brown

© copyright 2012 Kathy Fischer-Brown

In all of his seventy-four years, Jack Stone had never done anything impulsive. Now he wondered why he had not stopped to consider the consequences. But it was too late to turn back. The name on the mailbox and the crunch of gravel beneath the tires told him that he'd arrived.

Two hours on the road had seemed like a moment, as if all awareness of the drive had been suspended and he'd been transported, beamed up, like in those silly science fiction movies the kids used to watch on TV.

What had possessed him to come, after three years of purposely staying away?

He cranked up the parking brake, switched off the engine, and settled back in his heated leather seat to gaze at the old summer house. In the settling twilight, the last glimmers of sun sparkled in the upstairs windows. Clusters of towering pines threw shadows across the driveway and down to the lake, where autumn leaves glittered like gold stars on its mirrored surface. A solitary sailboat, its single mast unrigged, lay still in the water at the end of the dock.

How Phoebe had loved this place! Especially in autumn when it was quiet like this, when the cottages around the lake had all been boarded up for the season, after the leaf peepers had gone and evenings brought on a sudden chill, raising a mist over the lake. She had always said it was the crispness in the air and a particular, sweet smell on the lake in fall that reminded her of that first autumn, before the kids, before the demands of his career and the responsibilities of raising a family. It was just the two of them then shortly after The War, a couple of years before the children. They were so young and in love, newly married, carefree, innocent. And naive enough to believe that time was their friend.

"Ah, Phoebe..." He wiped the tears from his eyes with his fingertips and, with a ragged sigh, choked back his grief.

Soon it would be dark. He'd have to go inside. Inside, where every cup, every stick of furniture, the cedar scent and the rustic floors with their braided rugs held a lifetime of memories. She'd be there, as well. In his mind he saw her in the kitchen — how she often turned from the stove when he came in, as if she were surprised to see him, as if he'd been gone for ages when he'd only been on the lake with Robbie, fishing for a couple of hours. And she'd flash him that special smile, that beautiful smile that told him how happy she was, how much she loved him.

Why had he come? What did he hope to accomplish, except to open wounds that only recently had begun to heal...after three long, lonely years of living without her?

~\*~

Everything was still the same. Jenny's framed paint-by-numbers still lifes — darkened by time — hung in the dimly lit foyer at the foot of the stairs, along with the framed photos: Jenny had to have been all of ten, Robbie eight, and Melissa in Phoebe's arms, all clustered around the new pup in the grass, all beaming. Poor old Jasper! Good old dog. Over thirty years gone! Another of Robbie on the dock with his first fish, Jenny with her first summer friend...what was her name? Mel without her front teeth. Phoebe and the kids on their first boat. How worried she'd been that they'd be able to swim to shore if the boat happened to capsize...

Room after room held their ghosts, and he paused in each, lingering to recall this incident, that event, running his fingers over a picture frame, a lacquered chair, the hand-crocheted bed spread in Mel's old room...or was it Jenny's?

Rob and Suzie had been up from New Jersey for Labor Day weekend with the boys. Signs were everywhere a tennis ball, a Blu-Ray disk left out of its case on the dresser, a pair of dirty sweat socks in the corner on the floor by the bed. Maybe they'd left some food...

He made a meal of peanut butter and crackers; it was too much trouble to boil the pasta and heat up the sauce in the unopened jar. Besides, his legs ached from the trip and he longed to sit in the old rocker with his feet on the ottoman, and peer out through the glass sliders over the deck at the lake.

The moon had risen over the line of trees on the opposite shore, a harvest moon, casting a phosphorescent swath on the water. And while his thoughts carried him back in time, his eyes grew heavy.

~\*~

*"Jack? Jack, where are you?"*

Phoebe's voice. He'd had this dream before, many times. Phoebe called to him to come to her, but no matter how hard he searched, he could not find her. Yet the voice was real, too real to be ignored, even though he knew he was dreaming.

*"I'm here, Pheeb...right here."*

*"Jack...?"*

Stiffly, he pulled himself out of the chair and straightened his back. The room had gone dark. Not even the glow of moonlight penetrated the night.

*"I'm coming. Tell me where you are."*

*"Find the door, Jack. I'm behind the door."*

Always the same. The same frustration. There was never a door to be found, but he searched all the same, sometimes frantically, until he woke in the gray morning, staring at the ceiling and the walls.

*"Where is the door, Phoebe?"*

*"Here. It's here."*

He turned to his left, to his right. He turned completely around. Even in his dream, he knew there was no door. But this time, where no door had ever been, an unearthly greenish-yellow light seeped through, defining its outline. He slowly stretched out his hand, passing it through the light until he touched something hard and smooth where no door could ever be. He pushed it open.

Beyond the door, the light made his eyes sting. He closed them for a moment and when he opened them again, he blinked in disbelief.

A garden, lush and green as in early summer, with tall, feathery grass and flowers like none he had ever seen — large and round in vibrant reds and purples and everything in between — growing with a wild abandon. In the center of the garden, a tall willow tree with gray-green plume-like leaves overhung a small pool shimmering silver in the cool light. And beside the pool, a wrought iron bench.

The woman on the bench seemed to be waiting for someone. A young woman, slight of build, with hair the color of flax, and a smooth, fair complexion, she motioned for him to come and sit beside her. "I knew you'd come." Her smile was radiant and beautiful.

Phoebe's smile. Like Phoebe at fifteen or sixteen. The way she looked in those old faded photographs.

~\*~

Jack awoke in the rocker with his feet on the little ottoman, as the first light of morning glanced off the lake and through the glass sliders.

"Strange..." he whispered, shaking off the effects of his unnatural sleep. He was too pragmatic to delve into the meaning of his dreams. Dreams were dreams. Nothing more. Still, this one was unusual. So unlike the dreams in which Phoebe was there, as if she'd never gone, as if the chemo had never wasted her body or taken her hair. He'd awake from those dreams with a pang in his heart and a great, swelling emptiness. This one left him only momentarily confused, until full wakefulness brought him to his senses and he remembered where he was.

He went upstairs to the master bedroom and unpacked his bag, showered, shaved and changed his clothes. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at his hands folded in his lap. Old hands, knobby and liver-spotted. Once they'd been strong and smooth, with long, tapering fingers. Artist hands, Phoebe had often said, although he'd never had any talent or inclination for anything artistic. Jenny got her ability from her mother, even though Phoebe's hands were small and pudgy. And always so warm.

He smiled. Phoebe's hands...

So many times they had walked hand-in-hand around the lake, she smiling and talking nonstop, never caring that he hardly ever said a word in response, squeezing his hand from time to time, while he simply reveled in the feel of her hand in his and her presence at his side. On days like this, with the autumn air warmed by the morning sun, they would return from their walks and she'd make him blueberry pancakes. Then they'd sit together at the kitchen table, sharing sections of the New York Times. He'd do the crossword puzzle in pen.

Three years and he hadn't touched a crossword. Three years without pancakes.

~\*~

At Mary Ann's Café in town, Jack sat in a corner booth at the back and ordered pancakes with blueberry syrup, sausages, and coffee. As he washed down his blood pressure pills and the pills for his diabetes and cholesterol with a glass of orange juice, he could hear Phoebe admonishing him for straying from his diet. And he'd reply that once in a blue moon wouldn't kill him.

With nothing better to do, he browsed in the used book store, bought a local paper and a copy of Salinger's short stories, then he picked up bread and frozen entrees at the IGA. For the drive back to the house, he took the long route, hoping to kill some time. By the time he returned, the afternoon sky had clouded over, and flashes of lightning flickered over the line of trees across the lake.

Jack made certain all the windows were closed, put away the groceries, popped the chicken and fettuccine with only six grams of fat into the microwave, and settled into his chair with the newspaper, as thunder rumbled in the distance.

~\*~

“Jack...?”

How could he have fallen asleep? He felt completely alert and wide-awake.

“Jack, honey...Please come back.”

He opened and closed his eyes. How strange. All was dark and silent. Not even the whir of the microwave disturbed the quiet. Hadn't it been just a moment since he had sat down with the paper? Or had hours passed? He listened for the beep that would have told him the food was long since done. Not so much as the ticking of the clock on the wall, or the patter of rain drops falling from the eaves. Not even the whisper of wind through the trees beyond the glass sliders. He groped for the lamp on the table at his side and recoiled when his hand encountered only air.

“Jack, where are you?”

He rose quickly from the chair, unencumbered by stiffness and pain in his legs. *The door. He had to find the door.* “I'm coming.”

It was there behind him, just as before, the greenish light defining its shape. And just as before, it opened at the slightest touch, revealing the garden, the silvery pond, the bench. And Phoebe. An older Phoebe this time, the way she looked at thirty or forty, smiling the smile he adored. He took a step over the threshold and immediately a sweet floral scent, like none he'd ever breathed, inundated his senses.

“I'm so glad you came back,” Phoebe said, and she tapped the space on the bench beside her. “I knew you would.”

“I miss you so much!” A wild fluttering seized his heart, leaving him breathless. He wanted to rush to her, take her in his arms, but his legs were leaden weights. “I can't, Phoebe! I can't move.”

Again she smiled. “It's still early, Jack. Another time then.”

“When?”

“When you're ready.”

“When will that be?”

“You'll know.”

“I want to be with you now!”

“I'll be waiting here.”

~\*~

A loud clap of thunder startled Jack awake. Lightning flashed, illuminating the room with the brilliance of daylight. Then all went dark, and a rolling rumble receded into the distance.

His heart racing, Jack closed his eyes and tried with all his might to will back the dream, but the real world intruded — the distant thunder, the beating of rain on the roof, and the plaintive reminder from the microwave. Even as the peculiar, sweet, unreal scent lingered over his senses and his face tingled with the cool warmth of the strange light, the dream began to slip away.

Jack ate his chicken and fettuccine at the table in the kitchen, washed his utensils, read a bit of Salinger, and at nine-thirty, went upstairs to bed.

~\*~

A relentless ringing lifted Jack from a deep, dreamless sleep. He forced his eyes open, closed them again, and rolled onto his side, hugging the pillows. But the sound persisted with alarming urgency. The phone. He groped for it on the bedside table.

“Hello?” He focused on the clock’s glowing numbers. Eight-forty-five. Who the hell...?

“Pops?” Robbie’s voice with an anxious edge. “I’ve been trying to reach you since Tuesday. Why do you keep turning off your cell phone? Do you have any idea how worried —”

“How did you know to call me here?”

“That’s just the point. I called everywhere. We were beside ourselves.”

“I’m fine, Rob. No need to be concerned.”

“You sound strange. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m half asleep.”

“Sorry I woke you. Next time let me know if you’re planning a trip.” Robbie sighed into the phone, then continued in a lighter tone, “We’re coming up for the weekend to take care of the boat and close the place up for the winter. Any chance we’ll see you?”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Thursday.”

“I don’t know. I have no plans.”

“Okay. Just remember to call if you decide to go home.”

“Okay. ’Bye, Rob.”

Jack hung up the phone and rubbed his eyes. He should have called Robbie as soon as he’d arrived, but he’d completely forgotten. Besides, he never expected Robbie to have been so upset. After all, he wasn’t a child who needed permission to take off on a moment’s notice.

He pulled the blankets to his chin and settled back into the pillows. Such a sleep. So heavy, and yet he felt as if he had not slept a wink. His legs and back ached. An odd tingling sensation, like he sometimes felt when he slept on his side, prickled his left arm, down to his fingertips. Now he’d never fall back asleep. He needed to move around, shake off the numbness.

He showered and dressed, then went down to the kitchen, put up a small pot of coffee and popped his frozen breakfast entree in the microwave. While his eggs and bacon cooked, Jack looked out through the sliders over the lake.

The storm had blown most of the remaining leaves from the trees around the lake and had strewn them like confetti over the now calm surface. Pale sunlight glinted off the water, blue-gray under a cloudless sky. A flock of Canada geese squawked overhead. He craned his neck to see them, but they must have been over the house.

He ate, put away the few odds and ends on the kitchen counter, and took his coffee and the Salinger book out to the old Adirondack chair on the deck. The air carried that same sweet, crisp autumny scent that Phoebe loved so much. Cool enough for a sweater, but not so cool that his fingers ached. He flexed his left hand. The tingling wasn’t as bad as before, but it was still there. If it didn’t go away, he’d call Dr. Patel.

~\*~

“Jack...?”

His heart raced. He could hear it thundering in his chest. He stood in the darkness and fumbled for the door, but it wasn’t behind him as before.

“Jack, it’s time. Aren’t you coming?”

“Where is it, Phoebe? Where is the door?”

“It’s there. Open it.”

Jack turned in a panic, his need to find the door heightened by the frenzied churning of his heart. He gasped for air.

“Phoebe...help me!”

“*Jack..?*”

“I can’t...” He could barely get the words out.

“Just open the door, Jack.” Her voice was more real than ever, as if she were there beside him. He could almost feel her breath on his cheek. “It’s there. Right in front of you.

He forced himself to inhale and he turned, stretching out his hand into the darkness.

And the door opened.

The scent of lavender and roses wafted over him along with the cool warm light, and he breathed easily, deeply, as the thundering in his chest subsided. A strange sense of serenity filled him, like nothing he had ever felt — a feeling of calm and contentment.

And then he saw her. Phoebe. The way he wanted to remember her, the way he saw her in his dreams. Plump and radiant, vibrant and alive, smiling at him over her knitting.

“Come sit here, Jack.” She patted the empty space on the bench.

He felt light and buoyant, as if he were hardly moving, and when he took his place beside her, his heart swelled. He took her hand, her pudgy little hand, and pressed it to his lips. “I miss you!”

“These things happen, but it’s not so bad.”

“How can you say that? You’re dead.”

“But I feel wonderful.” She withdrew her hand and took up her knitting. “Here I can be anything I want.”

He watched her for a moment. “Then that explains why you looked— ”

“Younger?” She laughed softly. “That was silly of me.”

He thought it odd that she could act so blasé. “Phoebe...”

“I’m sorry.” She set aside her knitting and turned to him fully. “I know how lonely you’ve been. That’s the truly awful part.”

“Everywhere I go, everything I do, I can’t—”

She silenced him with a finger on his lips. “Shhh. Let’s not talk of that.” She smiled. “Do you remember this bench?”

He hadn’t really noticed anything special about it, except that it was of wrought iron. But now, as he looked carefully and the details came into focus, it was no longer wrought iron, but oak and polished brass. They had bought it in upstate New York at an antique dealer in 1958 and after Phoebe scraped off the paint and rust, they discovered the intricate carvings of birds and flowers. In their first home, it became the centerpiece in the garden. They sold it when they moved into the condo. “How can that be?”

She slowly took his hand and looked down, drawing his attention to their hands in her lap. The sight sent a *frisson* through his blood. He expected to see his gnarly old hand, not smooth, straight tapering fingers. And when he looked up in question and met her eyes, the Phoebe who gazed back was the Phoebe who had first won his heart at nineteen.

She tugged on his hand and stood, drawing him up from the bench. “Look in the water, Jack.”

The pool was glass-smooth. His reflection, a serious young man, straight and tall, with dark wavy hair and clear blue eyes, stared back. At his side, the petite young woman, her arms wrapped around his, looked up at him with love and admiration.

Phoebe glanced over the pool. "Doesn't it remind you of the lake?"

"How you loved the lake..."

"I would have preferred something smaller, like this."

"You should have told me."

"It doesn't matter, Jack, as long as you're here."

"I don't want to wake up," he whispered. "I want to stay here with you."

She smile and pressed his hand. "Then why don't you close the door?"