

THE CELLAR DOOR

by Gary Jennings

no need to return

I hadn't thought about such a thing for ages, but the other day I happened upon the picture of an old-fashioned cellar door, and the echo of its slam came booming across the years.

The picture was in an advertisement for a new-fashioned cellar door to replace the old, so I assume the old kind are still around somewhere, though I can't recall having seen one in use since my childhood. I mean the outside, backyard cellar door -- relic of a time when most families lived in houses, and the houses had cellars underneath them and yards behind them.

Since this ad was hawking a modern, improved cellar door, the drawing of the old one made it look as ugly as possible -- no great strain on the artist; the old one was ugly. It consisted of a wooden wedge jammed against the back of the house. The sides of the wedge were solid wooden triangles and slanting up their hypotenuse slope lay two wooden door flaps, hinged at their outer edges to open from the middle. A wedge is a neat enough shape, but nailed to each side of it was a vertical piece of two-by-four, projecting a few inches above the slope to catch the doors before they opened all the way flat out.

The construction was frankly utilitarian and, while it made no bow to architectural aesthetics, it at least leaned on architectural antiquity. The very first American householders built exactly the same sort of cellar doors; you can still see them reverently preserved at Williamsburg.

I suppose the cellar doors of my youth might have looked all right when they were new, but I don't remember ever seeing a new one. My cellar-door days occurred shortly after the Depression, and there wasn't much of anything new to be seen. Certainly, when people talked about prosperity being just around the corner, they didn't mean around back by the cellar door. If the house enjoyed any New Deal at all, it was a lick of fresh paint on the exterior trim -- the front part visible to the outside world. The paint might sometimes stretch as far as touching up the back-porch banisters, but the cellar door had to settle for the last few rasping strokes of a nearly dry brush.

Not that paint was much use to a cellar door, anyway. Lying prone under every sort of weather and under every sort of assault that a neighborhoodful of kids could wreak on it, what it really needed was armor-plating. Lacking this, the cellar door demonstrated, more than any other part of the house, the brunt and bruises of a brisk existence.

The two hinges on either side were rusted red by rain and snow. They had surrendered a number of screws to innumerable violent

throwings-open, and the remaining screws were sprung and protruding. There might be either a metal hasp or staple, or both, still fixed to the center edge of the flap, from a time when the door had pretended to prowlerproof security. But these fixtures were likewise rusting into powder, and the padlock was either absent or eternally, uselessly locked onto the staple, the key having been long mislaid. It didn't matter; the hasp and staple hadn't met for years, because innumerable violent slammings-closed had warped the doors.

Several generations of tenants usually had tried haphazardly to brace the underside of the sagging panels with odd pieces of wood and assorted old nails. But this never made the doors fit any more precisely; it just made them heavier to lift and louder to slam shut. During those same generations, the weather had alternately soaked and sizzled the wooden planks. All their knots had long ago swollen and popped out or dried up and dropped out; the mortices had strained apart from their tenons all along the length of the planks; even with the doors closed, the inside of the cellar was always polka-dotted and pin-striped with daylight.

The outside face of the planks had eroded until the striations of grain stood up as abrasive as file teeth and, along the edges of the planks, bristled into wicked splinters. This upper surface of the doors was apt to be studded, too, with the rusty points of those bracing nails hammered through from underneath, imperfectly flattened down on the outside and straining to straighten up again.

The (technically) upright two-by-fours alongside the frame forever leaned wearily agape, no matter how many times they were banged back flush; and the posts, from having caught the doors innumerable times, were splayed and frayed on top like circus tent stakes.

Now, this newfangled cellar door they're advertising, it is armor-plated -- to the extent of being made entirely of steel. It still retains the wedge shape, but this is now a solid, hermetically welded, weatherproof frame. The door is not a pair of bang-apart flaps but a single smooth panel that raises up weightlessly at the touch of a finger, vertically, like the lid of a ~~can~~ trunk, hinged on an arrangement of torsion bars.

Right off, this new "cellar closure" disdains the clumsy hands and tools of the housebuilders, the carpenter or the home handyman. It is not to be constructed, assembled or knocked together. It is to be installed, says the advertisement, "installed by qualified mechanics." Such a remark has a chillier feel than the steel; there's something unnatural about a cellar door that's untouchable by unqualified hands. And in the long list of its virtues -- easy maintenance, may be locked from inside or outside, nothing to get out of whack, etc. -- the ad makes just one concession to the possibility that this impeccable gadget might come into contact with peccable human beings:

"Door," it says, "can be walked on."

That's fine. Can door be played King-of-the-Mountain on? One boy standing precariously spread-legged, slant-footed at the top of

its slope while a swarm of other boys try to tug, butt, wrestle, tackle, sling or topple him from his throne? Steel seems unforgiving to a small king's fall.

Admittedly, this new contraption ought to fulfill the primary function of a cellar door -- being slid down -- better in some ways than the old wooden one did. (I say its "primary function" because a song was once written about sliding down a cellar door; no one has ever set music to its being weatherproof, burglarproof or useful for getting in and out of the cellar with.) Heaven knows why we didn't all die before our teens, of tetanus or blood-poisoning, considering the number of rusty nails and germy splinters that had to be plucked out of our backsides after a sliding session on the door.

The steel panel will at least be splinter-free, and probably slicker for faster sliding in some weathers. But I bet it'll get too hot for comfort in the summer, and in winter its smoothness will shed the snow. The old-time doors were of such matte surface that the snow began to stick there even before it did on the ground. Came the first snowfall and that was the first place you grabbed for a handful to make the first snowball of the season. And later you packed down the snow on that slope to make a really zippy piece-of-cardboard toboggan slide. In imagination it wasn't a short five or six feet, it was an alp long.

Imagination is mainly what's missing from this new steel thing. Presumably the inventor put some of his own into designing it, but he's left no room for anybody else's. Look at the advertisement. Besides that drawing of the seedy old wooden door (captioned "before"), there's an "after" picture of the new patent paragon. It shows the steel lid raised and a beaming youngster hauling a gleaming bicycle out of his cellar.

Now I don't begrudge the boy his bike, albeit our cellar never knew such an expensive tenant toy. But he is obviously a creature of possessions. More than likely that cellar behind him is crammed with the accumulation of Christmases and birthdays: complicated transistorized toys, acquired at the behest of television commercials, enjoyed only until their batteries ran down and their one trick grew tiresome, and now relegated to oblivion until the next Good Will collection. That bike he's wheeling out of the cellar is probably just his transitional toy between last birthday's tricycle and next Christmas's motor scooter.

It's sad enough, his preoccupation with things; to him, the cellar door is no more than an accommodation for them. To us, it was an entity in its own right, to be played on, under and with -- capable of more uses, tricks, games and varieties of enjoyment than any modern toy deliberately manufactured for "fun."

Just because my generation was short on store-bought playthings I don't mean to glorify the joys of doing-without -- the concomitant is being scant on things like vitamins and calories, too -- but there's something to be said for the necessity of self-reliance. In the absence of possessions, easy mobility and packaged entertainment, the youngsters of my time had to use their imagination to enrich

their world. Our relationship with the old cellar door offers just one illustration. The modern child, rich in everything but the encouragement to invent his own good times, may be more pitifully deprived than we were. And his cellar door -- stainless, sterile, soundless, weightless -- is symbolic of some of the things he's missing.

As I think back some twenty-five years to our young time, the sound of that old cellar door is an almost incessant background accompaniment to our backyard activities. For example, there was the bang of its opening or closing every so often -- a quite different bang in each case, though the tormented screech of the rusty hinges was the same whichever way they were bent.

The slam of the doors' opening included the wrench they gave to the whole frame, the thud of their hitting the two-by-fours on each side, and a brief reverberation as they bounced there for a bit. Thus the opening slam was an entirely external noise, and so included the harmonics of roof gutters, drainpipes and windowpanes rattling in sympathy. By contrast, the closing bang of the door was an internal affair. Suddenly compressing the cellar air as it did, it created a sort of muffled implosion underneath the house. In this event, the things that vibrated in sympathy were dishes on shelves, pictures on the walls and any human beings indoors at the time.

Similar but less concussive in effect was the noise of a ball being bounced against the closed cellar door. This varied according to the breed of the ball -- tennis, basket, base or just plain rubber -- and according to what game it was involved in. For instance, there was the monotonous whump...whump...whump of a boy playing catch all by himself. And there was the irregular but louder wh-lam of a game that was a simplistic variant of baseball: the boy "at bat" tried to carom the ball off the door in such a way that it would fall uncaught ("a hit") between the other boys, playing "first base," "second base" and so on, strung out in a row the length of the backyard.

There were other noises. When we were quite young, the cellar steps made a dandy defilade from which to fire bang-bang broomstick rifles or real-bang cap pistols at an imagined or actual opposing army. Later, when we grew more sophisticated, we invented the catapult. This was a strip of old innertube, tied around a hinge at either side of the door and (always with some wincing on the gunner's part) stretched back and down the cellar stairs, to bombard the enemy's packing-case fortress at the far end of the yard. For missiles we used clods of the dusty backyard dirt; they burst with a realistic "smoke" when they landed. This made a comparatively quiet mode of warfare, until inevitably some enemy went home wailing loudly after a direct hit.

During the ensuing intermittent peacetimes, the catapult served to launch our penny-apiece balsa wood gliders on long distance flights, or to fire skyward a bundle consisting of a lead soldier tied by strings to one of our cowboy bandannas. At apogee this bundle would unfold and the soldier would parachute to earth. Sometimes, when we had a sufficiency of cast-off innertubes, we even managed to

catapult ourselves out of the cellar in one flailing, yelling, breathtaking bound.

If I seem to stress the cellar door's functions in boy-type rambunctious, naturally it's because that's what I remember best. But our female counterparts slid down the doors, too, or lay spine side by side on the warm boards and vied with each other in seeing how many "objects" they could make out in the shapes of clouds overhead. And I remember little girls in summer, sitting on the cool stone cellar steps in the shade of one closed door, dressing away at dolls or playing a murmurous game of "jacks." And always, in every neighborhood, there was at least one tomboy to join, as lustily as we, in the more rampageous cellar-door doings.

The cellar door afforded more than just its own delights. It was, after all, a door. On one side was the backyard and the whole wide world; on the other, Ali Baba's cave. Every place we lived, the cellar was more or less the children's domain, and seemed almost designed to be so. Inherent in the structure of the cellar door was the danger, to anyone taller than a child, of cracking his head on the lintel unless he stooped to a particular angle on reaching a particular tread of the stair -- which adults were forever forgetting to do. Besides, cellars were cellars in those days -- not basements or recreation rooms or any other kind of "functional area" -- and they came in only two varieties: dark and clammy-damp or dark and sneezing-dusty. Nobody but children and spiders wanted to spend any time in them.

We spent a lot of it there. The cellar was, for instance, one of the lurkeries of Hide-and-Go-Seek. Offhand it wouldn't seem to be a good one, what with having only the one getaway exit. But our game tacitly forbade the one who was It to just stick his head down the hatch and yell, "I see you -- in the cellar!" He had to come and find you. Since a single lightbulb of firefly wattage was standard illumination for the vastest cellar; and since It, having come down from the sunny glare of outdoors, was quite blind; and since the cellar was by nature heaped and stacked with lumber, furniture and jetsam, you could often sneak through the shadows, elude the groping It and slip out the door to hide again elsewhere.

Down in the cellar was where I was obliged to keep the occasional white rat or mouse or golden hamster I bartered from some schoolmate. But even down there in his breadbox-cage, such a pet seemed somehow to influence the women of the house to step higher when they walked. Down in the cellar, too, was where we usually built our flimsy, balsa-rib-and-stringer, rubberband-powered, dime-a-kit model airplanes; outdoors was too windy to work on them and upstairs they'd get sat on or something. And we built our "soapbox racer" cars down there, for two other reasons. That was hard, hot work and the cellar was cool. More important, these cars were accretions of baby-carriage wheels, sections of pipe, boards, old clothesline pulleys, every sort of junk -- and the cellar was where the junk was.

The cellar also did duty as a dungeon for prisoners of war. If the cellar door's hasp and staple were still in affinity, a stout twig shoved through the staple served as well as a padlock, since

those inside couldn't get at it. Sometimes, cruelly, we'd lock up undeserving prisoners: little kids who pestered to join us bigger kids' games, or just sissies of any age who were afraid of the dark, or of confinement or spiders. I don't suppose we really did much psychological damage to such victims, as they never stayed long in quod. We jailers might ignore or enjoy their caterwauling, but no adult upstairs in the house could. So these higher authorities always came forth with a mandatory stay of punishment, on pain of another kind.

There was one period when nobody, young or old, spent any time in our cellar. My father and uncle decided ~~to~~^{to} transmute the bitter and otherwise inedible fruit of two backyard peach trees into home-brewed brandy. Whatever recipe or inspiration they used, it required frequent attentions for a couple of weeks, and judicious tastings that sometimes kept them down there in the cellar until they had to be called, or awakened. They achieved, first, crocks of some syrupy substance that attracted to our house every insect from miles around; then an evilly seething and burping liquid of an odor that drove everybody, including the insects, out of the house; and finally a dozen or so of brimful Mason jars, sealed and put on the cellar shelves "to age."

They didn't; they died young. The first one, fortunately, exploded in the middle of the night when no one was down cellar -- and from then on no one was down cellar. We kids played out in the yard instead, and my father and uncle stayed indoors and went over and over their moonshine recipe, trying to figure what had gone wrong and whether anything could be saved.

Nothing was; the jars went off at unpredictable intervals over what seemed like the whole autumn. Each new explosion was ticked off with a pencil mark against the tally of jars drawn in a row on the kitchen calendar. Finally the last one went to flinders and, after some hosing out of glass shards and goo, the cellar was habitable again. But for a long time thereafter, our cellar smelled different from anybody's else's, and had a property all its own. Anyone who walked into it, including Al the Oilman who came fortnightly to fill our cellar tank, would walk out again a little happier just for having been there. It was the only time I ever knew adults to enjoy a cellar as much as kids did.

Even during the brandy bomb business, the closed cellar door served us as an easel, either for just-drawing-pictures or for the more earnest creation of posters to advertise the "shows" we were forever getting up. These ranged from one-man magic exhibitions to circuses to actual acted-out melodramas -- and the cellar door figured in all of them, at every stage from poster-painting to performance.

Some innate urge -- it was hardly talent -- made my brother Mike and me the prime entrepreneurs and protagonists of these affairs. Some innate good sense made all the other kids require rounding-up just to sit as audience. To take part as performers they required actual bribing: bubble gum baseball-hero cards, Wings cigarettes' airplane cards, send-in-able cereal box tops.

The one-man shows were the easiest to put on, as they were just me doing magic tricks in a painted-on mustache and a Bincolnesque top hat laboriously constructed of cardboard and black friction tape. My repertoire was generally limited to card tricks and those effects whose operative "gimmicks" (the word was still new then) could be laboriously constructed of cardboard and black friction tape. But occasionally, for some really ambitious disappearing act, the cellar door served as my stage trap. Never very successfully, I must admit; no matter how well it was camouflaged nor how well my "patter" mis-directed the audience's attention, those damned squeaky hinges always made the climax anti.

Next easiest to cast was a circus, because even the shyest of our playmates needed little seduction to enlist as a clown. Come to think of it, that's about all our circuses consisted of: clowns. Plus me or Mike as ringmaster in painted-on mustache and that same five-pound fabricated hat. Plus, when we could catch him unawares, our eminently satisfactory family cat. He was black enough to enact a black panther and, caged in a fruit crate with slat bars, without any urging enacted a wild one. Anyway, the cellar door, as usual, played its part. On these occasions, it became the tent flies from which each new act emerged onto the backyard tanbark -- the clowns doing cartwheels or whatever, the ringmaster flubbily cracking a piece-of-clothesline whip, the black panther being bumped up the cellar stairs in his box and cursing the day he was born.

The plays we produced were commonly abortions in more than the artistic sense. After one or two scenes, either the bedsheet curtain would collapse and bury the set and we would get too hysterically giggly to go on, or else the Elizabethan asides and catcalls continually exchanged by actors and audience would precipitate a free-for-all. However, as long as a performance lasted, the cellar served as back-stage and dressing room, and the cellar door was the wings. For some productions, though, the cellar door was more than mere stage machinery, it was integral to the plot -- e.g., its moaning hinges heralded the entrance of the ghost of Jacob Marley.

Our material didn't come from the Public Library Children's Room handbooks like Wee Playlets for Every Occasion -- those were all elves and marshmallow morals, and insipid. We preferred real scenery-chewers, gore and grue, and so staged adaptations from our favorite reading. The one I remember best was Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; I wrote and directed, and Mike starred in the dual title role. If there were any supporting players, I've forgotten them, because the supreme scene in the whole thing was the quick-change transformation of handsome Dr. Jekyll into hideous Mr. Hyde -- and, recalling the brevity of all our plays, that's probably the only scene there was.

At rise, we discover Dr. Jekyll's laboratory: otherwise the familiar cellar-door corner of the backyard, recognizable as a stage only by the delimiting bedsheet curtain and the complex cat's-cradle of ropes and strings used to draw it. Center, Dr. Jekyll's workbench: otherwise a derelict table resurrected from the cellar, draped with a floor-length (well, ground-length) tablecloth

and arrayed with arcane "equipment" -- everything glass we could collect: empty bottles, jam jars, etc.

Enter Dr. Jekyll, handsome, wearing painted-on Victorian sideburns and that perennial pasteboard plug hat. Muttering to himself suitable platitudes to establish his goodness, meek-and-mildness, seeking-after-Truth, etc., he juggles jelly glasses and colored waters like a demented bartender and finally achieves...the potion.

It was authentically foamy (pour vinegar into baking soda and watch) and awesomely repellent. After waving it aloft for a while, for the audience to admire its effervescence, and crowing things like "Eureka!", Mike quaffed a hefty draught from the beaker. He spent the next several minutes reeling around the stage, retching and clutching at his throat. A slug of that stuff would probably have sent anybody else to the bathroom, but this was Mike's Big Scene. He tottered and groped at the table, sending "equipment" crashing. Finally, when he had chewed apart everything onstage except that formidable hat, he collapsed behind the table.

And out of sight back there was the cellar door, through which, unseen, Mike slithered headfirst into the hands of our makeup artists. Of course, despite all our increasingly speedy rehearsals, it wasn't really a quick change. But an offstage narrator (me) had been provided with doomfully hollow-voiced lines -- viz., "mere Man daring to toy with the Secrets of the Infinite" -- to fill in the hiatus and keep the audience from getting fidgety.

Then Mike snaked back up the cellar stairs and into position behind the tablecloth, and the narrator shut up. The audience gasped as, first, Hyde's hand came into view -- gnarled, blue, pasted-on paper talons spasmodically twitching above the table top. Slowly the horrible whole of him appeared, wickedness eyebrow-pencilled all over his grimacing visage. The sideburns (impossible to remove on short notice) had become mutton-shop whiskers blending incongruously into a Fu Manchu mustache. The makeup artists' "cosmetics," on the order of sandwich relish spread, had given him a blotchy green complexion. From his mouth protruded celluloid fangs, courtesy of Crackerjack. That one gulp of potion had also unaccountably provided him with a batwing black cape (née some grownups' overcoat) and on top of all still rode that ineluctable black stovepipe hat, now cocked at a rakish angle and presumably become sinister.

Towering erect, the fiendish Hyde scraped with both hands at the unoffending air, and in a terrible voice proclaimed some of the evil doings he had in mind. But this oration went unheard in the audience reaction, compounded of a sprinkling of admiring applause, a guffaw of laughter from the older boys, and a chorus of shrieks from the tots and the girls. The curtain rang down -- or jerked across -- on this moment of theatrical triumph, achieved, mind you, at least ostensibly, before the audience's very eyes!

The next day's reviews were tremendous. Numerous of the smaller spectators had spent the night waking screaming from a succession of

nightmares, and at intervals during the day their mothers came to report this to ours. By popular demand, the show closed after that one performance, but Mike and I were gratified. We may not have got praise exactly, but we'd got wide critical notice.

We couldn't have done it, as we couldn't have done so many other things, without the cellar door -- the old kind of cellar door. Consider. Jekyll-Hyde could never have utilized this new steel job they're peddling nowadays; its lift-up panel would have been standing erect in full view of the audience.

The new door has a multitude of other shortcomings: no sound effects, no hinges suitably situated for tying a catapult to, no knotholes or extrusions to impart eccentric "english" to a bounced ball. And, itself featureless, it opens both ways to a desert. That side, a place to store things; this side, a place to parade them; nowhere any provision for the intangible, the notional, the let's-pretend and the let's-explore.

While the introduction of this new, improved cellar door implies that at least a few of the old kind still exist, it likewise implies that they aren't long for this world. And when they're gone, this world isnearer being a place in which cellar doors and other sorts of portals -- challenges, and opportunities, and new vistas, and growing-up -- all swing open for a child, not with a glorious here-I-come bang, but a well-oiled whisper.