

Boy finds secret doorway in bedroom and explores what's beyond.

The Vonnesta Project

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FOREWORD

Some things changed once I found the secret doorway in my bedroom. Actually, that's a little bit of an understatement. Everything changed when I found the doorway.

That's not quite accurate, either. I didn't really find the doorway. It found me. It was an accident.

I guess now would be a good time to tell you who I am. I'm Jeremy. Jeremy Margate. I am eleven years old and in the fifth grade. I go to B.B. Dourshadow School. We just call it Dourshadow. I live in Vonnesta, Illinois. It's this small town just north of Chicago. I like it. It's nice, although it gets pretty cold in the winter and the humidity in the summer makes it feel like you're walking around inside of a sponge cake.

How did I not notice a secret doorway in my own house, you ask? Well, you see, I hadn't been in Vonnesta that long. I had been living in Southern California, with my mom and my sister, before we moved to Vonnesta. My parents got divorced when I was nine and we moved out here the next summer, right before I turned ten years old. My birthday's August 24th, just so you know.

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We moved out here to Vonnesta, and I was pretty unhappy at first. I mean, my friends were all back in Sherman Oaks (that's the suburb in LA that we'd lived in), the weather was perfect all year round there, and I didn't want to leave. But, I didn't get to make the decisions, even if I was the man of the house. My grandparents lived in Vonnesta and had this huge house, so that's why we ended up where we did.

It took me more than an entire year of living in the house before I found out about the secret door. But, it changed everything. It wasn't just a door leading to an extra closet or anything. No. It was much more than that. Behind it was a whole collection of things I had never seen before, and a small handful of things I had only dreamed about. On top of that, there was stuff that was actually too amazing for anyone to even imagine. It was that incredible.

Have I got your attention? I hope so. There's so much to tell you and I'll start right from the beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

If it wasn't for the Vonnesta Project, I probably never would have found out about the door. You see, every year in the Vonnesta Public Schools, all of the fifth-graders have to do a report of some sort about something in Vonnesta's past. The teachers don't really care what we write about; it just can't be about how great it is that they finally put a good video store on Central Street last March.

Luckily, Mrs. Jablon allowed us to work in pairs on the Vonnesta Project. I quickly joined up with my best friend Andy. We were both in Mrs. Pegita's class last year. That's how we met and we became friends quickly. There's not much more to it. I could bore you with some of the stuff that happened during 4th grade, but frankly, I don't think you want to hear about that.

This project was a big deal, with a typed report, pictures, display board and a presentation in front of the class. Parents usually came to the presentation day, as well. Andy didn't want to get to work, but I had convinced him that we should head down to the library on Monday

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and begin working. I promised Andy that I would bring him my mom's special chocolate chip cookies. Andy loves my mom's baking. I do too.

So, off we went to the Vonnesta Public Library. There was a special room on the third floor called the Vonnesta Room. It had all sorts of boring information about Vonnesta (like taxes and real estate and laws and ordinances), but it also had some interesting books. Vonnesta was founded in 1851 and the Vonnesta Room had a whole wall full of items that were over 100 years old. The librarian led us into the room and told us to be very careful with the really old stuff, since it was very fragile and brittle. She also told us that we could make copies of anything in the room, but we couldn't check any of the books out.

There were so many different kinds of things in the room. There were both recent and old high school yearbooks from Vonnesta High School, biographies of some of Vonnesta's founders, histories of Mayswift University (the private college that's in Vonnesta), the minutes from City Council meetings, and so much more.

We spent a little while just pulling books off the shelves, trying to get ideas about what to do our project on. Every few minutes, one of us would suggest an idea for a topic, only to have the other guy bat it down. On the third shelf from the top, I saw a row of faded, green hardcover books. They all said *Vonnesta Directory*, with the year printed beneath them. I grabbed the 1886 edition.

I brought it to the island in the middle of the room and started flipping through it. The beginning of the book had all these advertisements for doctors, house painters and grocers. I went to the middle of the book and saw a listing of Vonnesta residents.

"Check this out!" I said.

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Andy came over and looked at the listings in the directory with me. It wasn't that different from today's phone book - except without the phone numbers. It still had the people's names in alphabetical order and their addresses, but it also had their jobs listed. It was amazing to look at this book and know that it was almost 120 years old! Just by holding the book, I felt like I was traveling through time.

"How does that help us with the project?" he asked.

I just shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. I just thought it was interesting."

"Well, you should check this out," Andy said, as he pulled a thin, old book off one of the shelves.

The title was *Photographic Views of Picturesque Vonnesta*. It was dated 1883 and had an introduction right at the beginning. Andy very gingerly turned the pages. The black-and-white photos (actually, they were more brown-and-white) were really fascinating.

"That's downtown Vonnesta!" I said as he turned the page. "Look at the dirt roads and horse carriages!"

We were about three-quarters of the way through the book when we saw my house. Or what we thought was my house.

"I think that's it," I cried. I couldn't believe it. My house was in the book.

"It looks like it," Andy agreed. He read the caption out loud, "Residence of Sotten Niederkorn on Chestnut Avenue."

"That's a strange name," I said.

I wanted to find out more about this Niederkorn guy, so I started by looking through the *Vonnesta Directory* that was still sitting out.

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Andy continued to look through the book, checking to see if he could find his house.

I found the listing for him in the book.

*Niederkorn, Sotten. Grocer. 2558 Chestnut Avenue (residence),
730 Storm Avenue (business)*

So, he was a grocer. And his grocery store (or whatever it was called back then) was in downtown Vonnesta on Storm Avenue. I showed Andy the listing for Niederkorn. He didn't care that much. He was too interested in trying to find out who lived in his house during the 19th century.

I yanked more books off the shelves, trying to find some more information about Niederkorn. However, I didn't find anything in the first three books I grabbed.

"I found my house. It was owned by some Dr. Bradigan guy," Andy said.

"What if our Vonnesta Project is on the history of our houses?"

Andy liked the idea.

The librarian then opened the door into the room. Dan Brasten and Gabe Murphy, both friends of ours, walked in and said hello. I wanted to keep looking for info about Niederkorn and Andy was just beginning to look for stuff about Bradigan, but we both had to get home soon. I told Andy that we should come back the next day and he agreed.

I was anxious to find out more about Niederkorn. As it turned out, I didn't have to wait too long at all.

CHAPTER TWO

When I got home, I said hello to everyone and went upstairs to my room.

Before going any further, I should describe the house to you. It's a three-story brick monster, with a big lawn in front and a nice yard in the back. There were green shutters outside the windows and a brown roof. I must admit, it's a cool-looking house. I rarely even saw these types of houses back in L.A., and I certainly never thought I'd be living in one. The best part of the whole deal was that the entire third floor was mine. Mom, my four-year-old sister Elise and Grandma and Grandpa all had their bedrooms on the second floor. The third floor was my territory and the room was huge.

OK, so back to where I left off. I walked into my room, threw my backpack down on my bed, and was going to head to the computer to go online. But something caught my eye. Well, that's not the right way to describe it. Something small catches your eye. This was more like something hitting me over the head.

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A few feet from my bed, on the right side of the room, there was a wall. In the year I'd been living here, all I had noticed about it before was that it was made out of wood and that it was very hard. Andy and I had been wrestling one time and he had tried this move on me that he had seen on TV. I slipped, fell, and hit my head on the wall. The bump I received stayed for quite some time.

What got my attention on this particular day was the wall. A door had appeared there. It wasn't a typical door – like with a handle and locks and stuff like that. It was as if a section of the wall had been cut out and popped open on hinges. There had never been a door there before – I was sure of it.

I was staring at this open door and rubbing my eyes to make sure I wasn't imagining things. I could only see darkness behind it. I figured it must be a hidden closet or something.

I was about to examine this new addition to my bedroom when I noticed a small piece of paper on the carpet. I almost ignored it, sure that it was just a scrap that had fallen out of my backpack. Normally, I'd just leave it on the floor and pick it up some time in the next week. But, for some reason, I decided to check it out.

The writing on the paper wasn't mine. It looked like the fancy writing you see on wedding invitations and stuff like that.

Even more surprising was what the note said:

Jeremy,

Congratulations on finding me. Surprised by the door? I venture that you were not previously aware of it.

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Please, come on down.

*Sincerely,
S. Niederkorn*

I froze. Niederkorn? The guy who I read about in the library? This couldn't be for real. How could Sotten Niederkorn, a man who lived here in the 1880's, be writing a note to me? I figured it must be some kind of joke or something. But, the only person who knew about Niederkorn was Andy. We had biked back together from the library, so there was no way he could have gotten into the house before me and left the note. And, even if he did (which he didn't), he couldn't have made a door out of my wall!

My mind was racing. I was excited and surprised. I was scared and curious. I didn't know what to do or what to feel.

I reread the note. "*Come on down,*" it said. Down? Like down some stairs? Did this doorway lead somewhere? I was sure at first that it must be a trick closet or something. But this note from "Niederkorn," if it was real, was something else. I didn't know what to think.

There was only one thing to do - I had to see what was behind the door.

Shaking out of my frozen state, I tiptoed to the door and opened it more fully. This let some more light in. Sure enough, it was no closet. I could see stairs leading down.

After a year in this house, I knew there was a main staircase that went from the first floor up to the second and third floors, as well as the stairs in the kitchen that led to the basement. It was a big house, but I

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was sure that I'd explored everything since I'd moved in. Obviously, I was wrong.

I saw a gold handle on the backside of the door. (I guessed it was there so that the door could be closed from inside the staircase. But, I wasn't about to shut myself in.) The light from my room let me see that the staircase didn't go straight down – it curved in a spiral. So, after the first steps down, the light from my room did no good and it was pitch black.

I let my eyes adjust, but I still couldn't make out much. I gradually stepped down the stairs, running my hands over the walls, looking for a light switch of some kind. I couldn't find one.

I've got to admit that I began to get a little scared. It was dark and I didn't know where it went and, all of a sudden, I just didn't feel like being down there. I bolted back up the stairs and breathed a large and unexpected sigh of relief to be back in the light of my room.

"Jeremy, are you there?"

My mom was calling me! I had left the door to my room open and I could hear her coming up the stairs. "Yeah?" I yelled back.

"I've been shouting your name over and over again! What are you doing in there? It's time for dinner!"

She was getting closer and closer to the top of the stairs. I looked at the door to the staircase. Decision time. I shut the door, which closed without a sound, just as my mom entered the room.

She stopped in the doorway. "Have you been up here the whole time?" she asked.

I nodded my head.

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"Is something going on?" She paused. "Why are you just standing there next to the wall?"

I turned and looked at the wall next to me, as if I didn't know that that's where I was standing. The door was gone. The wall was just...a wall. "Ummmm...I don't know." I had to come up with something quickly. "I was, um, just, um, thinking...about the Vonnesta Project."

Mom was looking at me, with a puzzled look on her face. I couldn't tell if she believed me or not. "Well, dinner's ready."

"Oh, sorry," I stammered. "I must have been in a daze."

"Are you feeling OK? You look a little flushed."

"No, no, I'm fine. Really."

Mom turned around and headed down the stairs. I followed, but stopped when I got to the doorway. I turned back to look at the wall. Nothing. The door had blended in and vanished - as if it had never been there.

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