

You've heard this tune, but we think you'll like the fresh lyrics.

Piper

by Paul E. Martens

“Go back.” “Stay away.” The oldest buildings will seem to whisper warnings as you weave your way through narrow lanes and alleys and passageways that seem like inadvertent gaps. You'll follow a twisting path deep into the place where the city began, not really sure of your destination, looking for something they'll say you may not have. When you're convinced you must have passed it, that you've taken a wrong turn, or two or three, you'll suddenly see a house that's only wide enough for its door, though maybe you'll notice that the door is really wider than any door in such a place has a right to be. If you're the wondering kind, and you must be, or you wouldn't be there, you might even wonder why the door doesn't look like any kind of wood you've ever seen.

You'll look right and left and over your shoulder before you approach that door, but when you're sure that there's no one to witness what you're about to do (Did a face just disappear behind that curtain over there? Did somebody just duck behind that pile of refuse? No, no, you're just nervous), you'll swallow and walk right up to that attenuated house as if you weren't scared at all and you'll take a deep breath and knock.

You'll want to run away. You'll look around again, this time searching for an avenue of escape. You'll wonder how you came to be there, what possessed you to do this thing, but, before you can retreat, before you can decide to stay, the massive door will swing slowly, heavily inward, and out of the dark will come a strangely accented voice. “Come in.” Compelling you, not commanding you to enter. “Come in.” And it will seem to you that you have no choice.

Drawn by that voice, by curiosity, by the feeling that you can't back out now, you'll go in.

The door will close with a ponderous finality, shutting out the old city and making the newer parts of the city an uncertain memory. As your eyes grow accustomed to it, the darkness will fade and a piece of the dark will slowly become an old man standing before you, smiling a smile that stretches almost to madness, and you won't understand how

anyone could be so glad to meet you. Just an old man, like your grandfather, or, if you ever knew him, your great-grandfather. Tall and attenuated, like his house. Apparently fragile. Just an old man, but the sight of him will make your head swim with wonder and fill you with visions of facts and fantasies. The very last of the men from Earth.

Neither of you will speak. He'll seem to hold his breath as he waits and watches you discover the walls around you, walls covered with pictures and paintings of the planet of the old man's birth. He'll see the awe and the fascination in your eyes and his smile will broaden. He might even laugh, a single bark of triumph he'll be unable to contain. He'll know, you see, he'll know that at last the one for whom he has been waiting has come to him. He'll know that he can make you want the stars.

Oh, you won't know yet that you'll want the stars. You'll be looking for a tall tale or two, the thrill of hearing about things your parents would never discuss. Rocket ships. A fabulous place impossibly far away and out of reach. But the old man will know. He'll see right into your heart and his excitement will match your own, even if you'll be too excited to notice.

You won't have forgotten your lessons, of course. Lessons that said you must work hard to make your planet your home, you have to keep your eyes to the ground. Lessons taught by the old ones to their children, and they to their children, and passed on to you. They feared the Earth, fled from the Earth and its people. They fled from war and threats of war, unbreathable air and undrinkable water. They fled from hunger and sickness, from death and persecution. They won't want to let you forget the needs and wants they remembered and which remained unfulfilled. Lessons of colonists who faced so many things for which they were not prepared. Lessons of struggle.

But those lessons will be only echoes, sounding hollow as all echoes do. Haven't you had enough to eat? Haven't you had time to play? Haven't you had time to imagine?

And the old man will know what you are thinking, what you are feeling. He'll show you marvels and treasures. He'll