

2125 - The Hibernator

What if you wake up in 100 years?

Fons Burger

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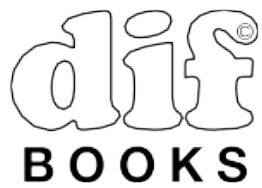
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FONS BURGER

This book is dedicated to my children, grandchildren and their descendants.

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It's the year 2125. Max Bloemendaal awakens after a hundred years from the Coma Superviviente — an artificial hibernation that brings him back, barely older, into a completely changed world. He discovers that after a disastrous century of wars, climate crises and pandemics, humanity has found a future no one could have imagined. Max resumes the search he was forced to abandon a century earlier: who was behind the disappearance of his wife, the physicist and activist Felice Ricci?

Fons Burger (1952) is a Dutch journalist, writer, musician, and cultural entrepreneur. Throughout his career he has combined investigative journalism, activism and creative entrepreneurship.

He served as editor-in-chief for leading magazines and produced documentaries for Dutch television and the BBC. As a cultural entrepreneur, he created several influential venues in Europe's live music scene and later founded publishing platforms devoted to long-term thinking and regenerative change.

Burger is the Dutch author of several novels, thrillers and essays on social transformation. With *2125, The Hibernator*, he continues a lifelong exploration of the intersection between society, sustainability, and imagination — searching for ways humanity can live in balance with nature and each other. Set against a backdrop of mystery, love, and suspense, the novel combines a gripping plot with a visionary look at our shared future.

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Chapter 1

A bitter acid sensation sets fire to his nose, mouth and throat. He thinks he is suffocating, gasps for air. It feels as if the oxygen he breathes in, flows straight to his brain. As if his windpipe is connected directly to the blood vessels in his grey matter. The burning pain mixes with the euphoric feeling that too much oxygen causes.

Something is moving above his head. His eyes are still closed, but there is so much light that he can perceive the outlines of that something. Max feels his mouth being pushed open by something soft, pressing into his jaw. Something solid is now attached to it, making a sucking, slurping sound. Another hard object, slightly thinner and pointier, enters between his teeth and a liquid suddenly squirts through his mouth. It feels deliciously fresh and has a taste he recognizes. He can't think of the word, realizes that almost no words come to mind. There is the image of a round white object, but he isn't sure if that is a projection, outside, above him, in front of his closed eyes, or if it is an indistinct thought floating around in his head.

There's a sound. Humming. Because he also feels something vibrating in his body, he realizes that he might be the one making that sound. He enjoys both the cooling liquid in his mouth and the vibrations felt somewhere halfway down his body.

At once it is dark in front of his eyes, an unpleasant shadow hanging over him. He hears bubbling and humming everywhere around him. It feels as if he is underwater and someone is trying to talk to him. But close to his ear he also hears a beep, a constant rhythm reverberating into the space around him. Then there is a violent, heavy clatter that he also vaguely recognizes. He searches again for the word that goes with it, tries to think of where he has heard it before.

Peppermint comes to mind, but no, that's the word he was looking for just before. The taste of peppermint. By now the rinsing in his mouth has stopped and the leftover fluid is being sucked out. The bitter taste returns slowly but weaker, softer, more bearable.

He now hears the sound coming from all sides. Just before he starts to slide back into the intensely black darkness he had come from, the word comes to him: Applause, the clatter he heard a moment ago, was applause.

Everything goes black again.

Later, when the light returns, he wonders how long he has been out. An almost familiar scent reaches him. He can smell! The beeping is still there, or there again, but the light shining through his eyelids is different. Less piercing, like the air he breathes, he needs more of that now. Where am I? he wants to ask. But when he tries, he finds that he can't. A sound does come out of his throat but it's no more than a soft, toneless gurgle. Many thoughts shoot through his head. He notices his breath hitching and he also feels something now, something at a distance, something that somehow also belongs to him.

An oppressive feeling. A moment later, he realizes that it's inside of him.

In my body, he thinks and tries to push the other thoughts away. He tries to think of what that body looks like. His head, the ears that hear a beeping, his mouth, which now has only a faint taste of bitter acid left in it.

That oppressive feeling must be his stomach. He can't feel his legs. Or his arms. But wait, his arm is now being picked up by the wrist and he feels something or someone squeezing it. Endless thoughts shoot through his head again. Why didn't he hear anyone come in just now? Why can't he open his eyes? Why can't he speak? Where's the feeling in his legs?

Damn, he tries to say, but the only thing coming out of his mouth is that faint gurgle.

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The only way he can determine that he's in a room is by the light and shadows because everything is white but in different shades. He sees a large, bright frame, a window, it's daytime. It must be a hospital bed because there's a handle above his head to pull himself up. A lot is going on around him. Someone is sitting in a chair at the end of his bed, but it isn't a regular chair, there are hoses and cords leading to or from it, he has no idea what or who it is.

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Someone else is sitting next to him. He recognizes the voice, it's familiar. It's probably his regular doctor or nurse because he constantly wants to know how he is doing, if he feels pain anywhere, what the effect is of the pills being fed to him.

And what he sees.

I can't see diddly-squat, he says, his voice still sounding hoarse but getting better the last few days.

Diddly what? asks the voice, what do you mean Max?

Max, he murmurs. Yes Max. I am Max.

Yes, Max Flowerday. Tell me what you see.

Everything is fuzzy, very fuzzy. Like I need glasses. Very strong ones. Do I have glasses?

He feels a vast tiredness overwhelm him, closes his eyes and sinks into the blackness. The last thing he hears is the man saying that all glasses, except sunglasses perhaps, are very old-fashioned.

He loves darkness and sleep. He dives into them and takes shelter there for as long as he can because when he is awake, everything takes effort. But if he dives in too deeply, all sorts of people come to him again, images, situations, events that mostly just confuse him. He knows the people, but he can't remember their names, or what they mean to him. A neighbor, a child, a parent, an acquaintance? He doesn't know. In his dream, though, he suddenly sees the man sitting at the end of his bed very clearly. He's a young man, looking sullen and busily swearing, complaining that all his blood is being sucked out of him. Then he feels somebody shaking him, the man still sitting next to him telling him he must stay awake.

It will take some time, he says, it's in your blood and glands but don't worry, it isn't very complicated these days, he hears him say.

Doesn't he remember having an illness? Wasn't it very bad? Bad as in hopeless? He hates that damn memory of his, it's a muddle and the harder he tries, the more all the thoughts blend together.

He forces himself to think, he needs clarity. So he's in a hospital, has a serious illness that suddenly isn't all that serious anymore. Someone is constantly at his bedside. And there's a grumbling young man by the foot of his bed, connected to him via hoses and cords.

Who is sitting there in that chair? he asks. That's Simon. Simon Flowerday, comes the reply.

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Max remembers that surname. Yes, of course, he just heard it. That's his name, too.

A relative of mine?

The room remains silent for a while. A cough, a sigh, someone seems to be doing some serious thinking.

He's your grandchild or actually your great-great-grandchild. Okay, says Max. What's he doing there? Why is he grumbling so much? It's a bit complicated to explain all of that now, we're borrowing his blood to make yours better.

It's quite exhausting for him, takes a lot of energy.

Then the family relationship hits him.

Great-great-grandchild? He wonders for a moment. A grandchild is a child of your son or daughter. They then have a child and that is a great-grandchild, he recalls. But a great-great-grandchild? Four generations on?

I will explain that to you as well, Max.

That would make me very old.

Very old, Max.

...&...

The machine into which he must put his head makes him anxious; the liquid that is sprayed into his eyes hurts. A voice asks if he feels anything, and when Max curses, the voice says the anesthetic will take effect soon.

His eyelids are automatically caught in some kind of clamp and held open. He's instructed to keep his eyes still and to focus on a bright light that has sprung up in front of him. He sees a sharp object coming towards his eye and as it enters his frozen gaze, hears a slurping sound.

Then comes time for his other eye's procedure, which goes more smoothly because the anesthetic has had more time to take effect.

The robotic arms barely make a sound and in less than a minute he hears the voice say: ready!

Now he can sit up straight. He looks around, startled. The vague outlines he has so far observed from his bed, the table, chairs, the bunch of flowers and some fuzzy posters on the wall, are suddenly all razor-sharp. The view takes his breath away. Something is projected on the wall and the ophthalmologist asks Max to tell him which letters he sees. Max thinks. Letters, words, text, he isn't quite there yet. He sees the figures sharply, recognizes shapes, but can't name them.

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Perhaps something has gone wrong. Can't you read anymore? the ophthalmologist asks kindly.

I don't know, says Max. All of this just doesn't mean anything to me right now.

The man shrugs.

I'll just test the projection, he says and presses a few buttons. Some icons suddenly flash on in Max's field of vision. They startle him, especially because when he turns his head, the icons remain in front of him, at the same spot, no matter which way he looks.

What the hell, he says angrily. There's something in my eyes, he exclaims. What have you done?

So what do you see?

A bunch of green figures, he says angrily.

Easy, easy, the ophthalmologist says hastily and presses a button. Now they're gone, aren't they? I'll deactivate this feature for now.

Without another word, the ophthalmologist drags the machine out behind him and leaves Max's room. Before the door can slam shut, someone pushes it open again, two men enter. Max is stunned; he now sees everything with razor-sharp clarity.

Well, Max, is this a good time? I hope it wasn't too bad? They inserted artlenti into your eyes. Your natural lenses have been replaced, so to speak, by better, multifunctional ones. You'll get used to them in a few days.

Max recognizes the voice. The man had introduced himself earlier as Doctor Jan Drent, his personal beacon amidst all this insanity. Standing next to Drent is a young man with dark skin, big green eyes and a tight jawline. He wears a white coat and something indefinable hangs around his neck.

Jan Drent, Max exclaims, I can see you! I can see you, man! What a miracle.

Jan smiles faintly. He points to the young man standing diagonally behind him. Curiously, this person looks vaguely familiar to Max.

So here he is, says Jan. Your great-great-grandson Simon. Simon this is Max, Max this is Simon.

Max smiles as kindly as he can, but he sees that it doesn't come across. Instinctively, he reaches out his hand to shake Simon's. Simon is startled, looks confused and puts his hand on his heart. He nods his head gently.

Oh, Max just says and waves his outstretched hand a little. He tries to stand up but only partially succeeds. He pulls his legs up and beckons Simon closer.

Simon, Max mutters. You're related to me? Ha ha, am I your grandfather, or your great-great-grandfather even?

Simon flinches a little because of the laugh that apparently sounds rather sinister. Max thinks he sees aversion in his eyes.

Understandable, since he looked at himself in the mirror this morning: his skin looks strange, his bald, wrinkled head resembles a giant, shriveled seed potato. There are two bags under his eyes, spacious enough to hold a pigeon egg.

Yes, good afternoon, Simon says politely. Are you feeling better yet? All three of them chuckle as they realize the triviality of the question.

Max doesn't answer. He's suddenly very tired and lets himself fall back against the sloping upper part of the bed. He looks intently at his two visitors. Has he seen this Simon before or does he look remarkably like someone he used to know? He has started dividing his memory into circles with a post in the middle. One post for people, one for the surroundings, one for events, one for facts and one for miscellaneous. Closer to the post, the memories are clearer than those at the edge of the circle. This Simon belonged in the family circle, close to the center. Does he resemble his son? Did he have a son?

I'm Max Flowerday, says Max. It's something of a mantra that he learned. Drent had said it to him over and over again after he had asked: Who am I?

You are Max Flowerday, Jan said then.

Since then, he has been saying it 20 times a day and he seems to be getting used to the name, although it might just be a name people have given him, he doesn't have a clue. But then Simon says: That's also my name, Flowerday, Simon Flowerday.

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A girl in tight white overalls has just put a plate with a shiny, silver dish cover in front of him. Max sees himself in it, distorted as if in a funhouse mirror. Underneath it is his lunch, he knows.

In the past few days, he has been seeing images of a large piece of tender, Argentinian beef lying on a well-lit barbecue in his mind's eye. A beautiful, crispy, almost blackened exterior, the liquid sizzling out when poked with a fork. He can almost recall the flavor.

Don't you want to watch? the girl asks with a practiced smile. She is new to the ward, or he has been moved from another ward, he can't quite recall which. She wants to take the lid off his plate, but he grabs her by the arm.

The girl looks startled at the fingers around her wrist and pulls her arm back roughly.

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Wait just a moment, says Max, I'm imagining there is an Argentine 'bife de lomo' underneath, fresh from the barbecue. He closes his eyes and feels his mouth start to water. When he opens his eyes again, he sees the puzzlement in the girl's eyes.

Don't tell me you don't know what beef is, says Max, adding almost pleadingly: please.

Hah, of course I know what beef is, she says, after recovering from his touch.

Max is relieved and asks if she can arrange a big steak for him one of these days.

A stake in what? she asks. Confusion suddenly reigns.

But after all misunderstandings are resolved with some giggles, she says that meat is not really on the menu in this hospital, or in any hospital for that matter. And meat coming from Argentina, well, she certainly never heard of such a thing.

A small piece of beef would cost as much as 100 creds, she adds. Way too expensive for me.

Max looks disappointed but also manages a shy laugh at his own expense. He has no idea how much 100 creds is but surely he would be willing to give it up for a bife de lomo.

After the girl removes the cover and leaves the room, Max sighs deeply again. He sees a cup of broth and a deep plate with mixed vegetables blended into a mush with some large mushrooms on top. There's also a small bowl with a yellowish kind of custard. He sips from the hot broth carefully. It has a strange taste and an even stranger smell, but by the second and third spoonful he swallows, he comes to appreciate the taste.

Looking at the tray, a vague memory of hospital food suddenly comes to him.

Foodwise, hospitals haven't improved much, I might even start longing back to the slop they used to serve in the old days, he grumbles.

There is no one in the room to hear his complaints.

A few minutes later, Doctor Drent is in his room. He greets him warmly with his hand on his chest and sits down on a chair next to Max's bed.

I hear you have complaints about the food, says Drent.

Max looks at him in surprise. He knows he hasn't complained to the kitchen girl, he did no more than joke about steak a bit.

You said hospital food hasn't improved much, Drent says to clarify.

Max looks around startled. Are they spying on him? His eyes scan the room. The small, round objects he noticed before in the ceiling corners, he now realizes what they are. Come to think of it, the mirror is also conspicuously integrated into the wall.

Normally, people sign our terms and conditions upon arrival, Drent says, but in your case that was a bit difficult, given the state you were in.

Drent smiles a little awkwardly and starts explaining that there really isn't anyone who's watching him all day.

What we do have are camera images and a computer that is constantly analyzing whether you're okay, whether you need something or, as happened now, make comments. Because we want to keep an extra close eye on things in your case, it's set to a rather high level of sensitivity. Drent smiles again, a bit sheepishly now.

There is a private mode though. All you have to do is ask for it, he says. Just say 'camera off'. That will turn the system off and no one will be able to see or hear you. It would be better if you don't do that too often because the program alerts us if you become unwell. Or if something interesting happens to which we have to react.

Like my complaining, Max mutters.

Your comment about the old days, says Drent. And what you said about the bife de homo. Ha ha, it sounds like you all used to eat human meat. What really matters to me is that obviously you're starting to remember things. Things that happened a hundred years or more ago. That's good news, Max.

Lomo, Max thinks, loins, indeed he realizes this is a memory. But then the number hits him.

A hundred years... he says hesitantly. And then he asks: a hundred years?

Yes Max, you spent a hundred years in a coma.

But that's impossible, Max exclaims. Right? That's impossible, isn't it? Say it's impossible.

Drent puts his hand on Max's arm. He looks at him intently, searching for words.

A hundred years ago, there was an experimental clinic in Mexico that put people in a coma and could stop the ageing process completely with dubious methods, Drent says. A kind of room-temperature cryonization. An extremely long hibernation.

Max's jaw drops, literally and figuratively, he sucks in air and holds his breath. He wonders if Drent is joking, even though he knows he is not.

I don't remember any of it, Max says.

So much is suddenly going on in his head. That he had been in a coma for a long time had dawned on him by now, but a hundred years? A century?

I was sick, says Max, I was sick, right? I was going to die anyway?

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Yes Max, you were incurably ill.

Drent clicks his tongue and asks for a numbered file. The mirror built into the wall now suddenly shows a photo. Max sees himself, but not as before, when the mirror was still just a mirror, not the tired head with confused eyes and the sagging facial skin. It's a photo in which he is smiling broadly, with a big head of hair and a healthy colour in his smooth cheeks. At least, if he is indeed the man in that photo. Before he can speak, Drent clicks his tongue and a second photo appears on the screen. Max looks intently at the people in it. They are barefoot, the beach is bright white, the sky a clear blue. He sees two children, one a girl and one a boy who looks a bit like Simon. A grumpy man in the middle, that must be him. Next to him is a woman, his wife? Yes that must be his wife, a lot younger than him and beautiful, very beautiful, with curly hair, a proud look in her eyes and a broad smile around her lips.

That's Felice, Max says spontaneously. He doesn't really know where the name came from. It's just there all of a sudden.

Felice, yes, she's my wife. Is this a picture from a hundred years ago? And those children. Daan and Sam, he suddenly knows and he speaks their names aloud. Daan and Sam.

He dares not ask if they're all dead.

...&...

The nurse pushes him out of the hospital. In an old-fashioned wheelchair without a motor, joystick or any other modern additions. When they stop he gets up because he can walk on his own, he has trained his legs vigorously in recent weeks, as well as the rest of his muscles, carefully, one by one, group by group. Some hairs have tentatively returned to his head. The Plastic Tech department has already tightened the sagging skin around his head and body quite a bit. They've also tinkered with his brain. They bombarded his little grey cells with electric pulses on his skull, light and sound waves and endless exercises. He started remembering more and more over the past two months. His posts got higher, his circles bigger and what was in them became clearer.

It's like having reverse dementia, he had told Drent. In ordinary dementia, you first lose your short-term memory, then your long-term memory fades away until finally you can't remember the names of your own children anymore and you slowly sink into total oblivion before turning into a vegetable.

With me, it went the other way around. I woke up a vegetable, I seemed to have no past at all, but my memory gradually got better and better. In tiny steps, more and more memories from longer and longer ago returned, so now I even remember the names of my children and grandchildren again.

A vehicle slowly approaches the entrance of the hospital, it's a simple thing, just a basic frame on wheels with an open cabin with an open cabin at the back, covered by a small roof to provide shelter from the rain. The cabin has six seats.

It somehow reminds Max of a shuttle for the elderly at amusement parks or cheap airports, but with big wheels and poor design. It has no aerodynamic lines whatsoever, but they would serve no purpose anyway, given the vehicle's pathetic pace. Max notices that there is no one behind the wheel; indeed, there is no steering wheel. Aïcha, Simon's wife, sits in the back. He waves excitedly at her; she jumps out of the car before it has fully stopped. The vehicle seemingly objects to this and voices some safety concerns, but she runs towards him, wraps her arms around him and hugs him tightly.

Come here Max, give me a big hug, she exclaims. It's finally allowed, no more germophobic hospital patrol to stop us now.

Aïcha is half a head taller than he is and has a full mane of dark curls. Her bright blue eyes don't really match her olive skin and the North African features in her appearance.

Max looks up at her a little helplessly at first, then frees himself from her firm hold and wraps his arms around her. He feels the warmth of her body through the curious fabric of the suit she's wearing, her moist breath on his neck after she puts her chin on his shoulder, even the beating of her heart. A wonderful sensation, the best he's had since waking from his coma. He wants to say that he could stand there like that for another hundred years but reckons that such a remark might sound a bit odd coming from him.

The car didn't wait for them and went on its way to its next cargo. Max apologizes for holding her for so long, Aïcha shrugs her shoulders cheerfully. She presses her ear for a moment, Max sees one of those devices there, small and elegant. He had to get one as well, they had explained to him in the hospital, because that's how everyone communicates these days, and with those artlenti, those lenses that project annoying texts into the corners of his eyes.

Max had asked for a mobile phone, but everyone had laughed heartily at that.

Aïcha utters the word 'taxi' and another one is already approaching. It's an even uglier model in a fire-engine-red and with sliding doors that open automatically. They take

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a seat in the back and Aïcha mentions an address. The doors close and the vehicle starts moving.

He looks out of the window at the city where he last took a taxi to the airport a hundred years ago. Through the open window, he listens to the sounds of the city. He hears the whispering of wheels over the road surface that has a strange sheen. It's clearly not asphalt; he doesn't recognize it. A ship's horn in the distance. The rustling of trees and some laughter from people passing by on the pavement. Otherwise, it's pretty quiet.

It used to be crowded here all the time. Where have all those people gone? he asks. Aïcha watches silently.

There are still some houses from his time but there are many gaps in between the buildings, with gardens, parks and trees to fill the open spaces. The new houses are made of a material unknown to Max. Aïcha tells him what it's called, something with printing, but it doesn't mean anything to him. He also sees a lot of wood and glass, tall buildings with terraces up to the penthouses. Walkers, cyclists and more taxis calmly slide past each other. The air is clean, the sun shining brightly. The pace seems slower than it used to be, back in the day everything had to be done faster and faster all the time. In between the traffic, he sees the remains of what his city was once. Tall mansions, the odd church here and there, converted into apartment buildings with windows behind which he can see daily life. The iron gate, a work of art highlighting the spot where a city gate once stood, still looks well maintained.

As does the town hall they drive past, a squat building in beaux-arts-style with neo-Romanesque influences. He suddenly remembers standing on the pavement there after a simple wedding ceremony with Felice. He tries hard to remember how long ago that was. Married 130 years, that sounds bizarre.

They disappear into a tunnel and the interior light flashes on. And? What do you think? Aïcha wants to know.

Well, what can I say, Max replies, it all looks quite logical, though it's crazy that half the city has been demolished now, so much green. You used to have to look very hard to find a patch of grass, and when you found one, it was usually covered in dog shit. The gardens were all covered with toxic soil, so nothing much grew there. On the other hand, it doesn't look very modern, architecturally speaking. Quite a scrappy mess.

Aïcha smiles.

There has been a lot of innovation in architecture and urban development, she says, but then everything was reversed and after that, it went back and forth and then back again. But some kind of balance was achieved eventually.

When they exit the tunnel, they're almost immediately in front of a wood and glass building at least 20 storeys high. It's surrounded by a park and a wide river flows past behind it. The building rises up in steps, with balconies showing lots of greenery. No waving trees or orderly plants, but messy, balcony-sized allotments.

This is where you'll live for now, Aïcha says as the car comes to a halt. Until we find you something else.

...&c...

Even before Max and Aïcha reach the front door, it's opened by Simon. He slaps his hand on his heart in greeting and takes a step back. Max takes three steps forward, embraces Simon and presses him firmly against him. Simon struggles for a moment.

Max enjoys the touch again, the embrace, the two bodies against each other, the warmth radiating between. It's over, all that coldness, with those doctors and nurses in their white overalls, their rubber gloves and surgical masks. When he lets go of Simon, his great-great-grandson sighs with relief.

Felice, Grandpa Max is here, Simon calls out.

Max's thoughts immediately start to stray. As if he forgot for a moment that his super-grandchild was named after his wife Felice. The photos that Drent showed him thawed part of his frozen memory. In every picture he saw the beauty of his wife, who exuded such warmth, the dark eyes that always told a special story. It had felt so familiar and she had seemed so close.

The children required more effort. He patiently looked at the few images that had apparently been preserved. A birthday, a holiday photo. It all remained distant, far away, buried by time.

Felice, come greet Grandpa Max, now! Simon shouts again.

After some moping about the Grandpa Max title, he had decided he could live with it. The grandpa-to-the-max. Maximum old. At least that way they could also be done with all that great-great-grand-business and the third, fourth, fifth generation conundrums. In fact, he really is their primal grandfather.

Simon calls out to Felice a few more times. Then he walks to her room, annoyed, and slides open the door, standing broadly in the opening.