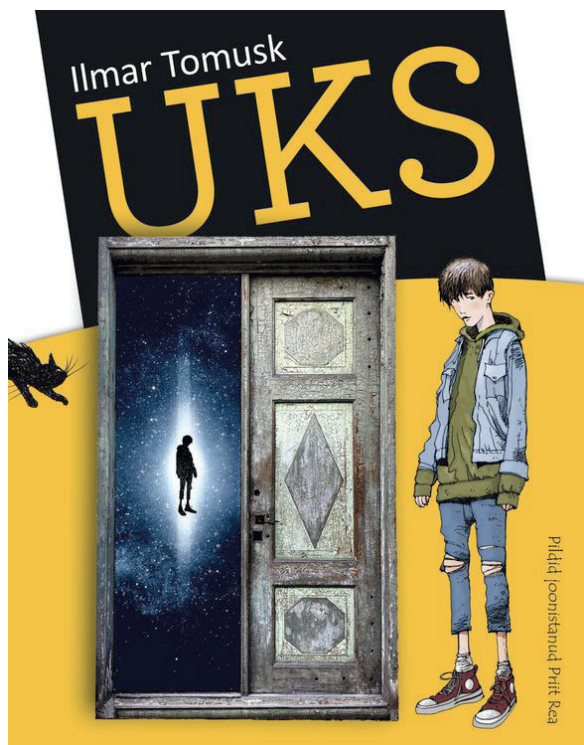


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### **The Door**

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Storybook, fiction,

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travel, problem solving

Age: 11 +

Max has no problem with going to school. Learning doesn't pose a challenge because he instantly memorizes everything he reads. If only it weren't for the terrible seventh-graders Mairoid and Baldy, who use every chance they have to make the boy's life unbearable. They hide his things, push and shove, and taunt him as best as they can. Once when Max is fleeing his tormenters, he dives into a thicket where he comes across a strange house he's never seen before, even though he walks that path home from school every day. The door is standing wide open and appears to beckon him, so Max gives into curiosity and enters.



## Reading sample

[pp. 85–89]

Dad had a weekend off work for the first time in a long while. He slept in on Saturday morning, getting up at ten forty-five. As Mom had a splitting headache again, she stayed in bed a little longer.

“What’ll we have for breakfast?” Dad asked Mäks.

“Dunno,” he replied. “Let’s make something Mom would like, too.”

“I’ll go and ask.”

Dad soon returned and opened the fridge.

“We have any eggs?”

“Should be,” Mäks replied. “I think I left five or six in there. Are we making pancakes?”

“No. Mom said she’d like a hard-boiled egg and exactly the kind that only you know how to make—with the yolk still runny.”

Mäks fetched his phone from his bedroom and started cooking. The phone was needed for its stopwatch. He dropped five eggs into a pot of cold water—two for himself, two for Dad, and one for Mom. Boil for one minute, keep in hot water for three, and then cool.”

“All done,” he finally announced.

“You can tell Mom that breakfast’s ready.”

Mom climbed out of bed. She looked totally exhausted and plainly felt terrible. Still, she wanted to enjoy the meal with her family—she knew there weren’t many chances left.

“This egg is fantastic. Cooked just the way I like it,” she praised Mäks. “I bet the Queen of England had her eggs boiled just the way you do it, and that’s why she lived to the ripe old age of ninety-six.”

“I hope my hard-boiled eggs have the same effect on you,” Mäks said.

Mom smiled. She would’ve wanted to live just as long as the Queen, too, but doctors told her she unfortunately wouldn’t be around to see her fortieth birthday. She’d already started getting used to the idea.

After they finished, Mäks offered to wash the dishes. Dad was happy to let him, as sloshing around in dirty dishwater wasn’t something he enjoyed in the very least. And Mom simply wanted to rest. Mäks’s parents sat at the kitchen table and watched him busy himself at the sink.

“We really do have a great son,” Mom said.

“Couldn’t be any other way—he’s our kid,” Dad agreed.

Mäks wasn’t the biggest fan of taking compliments. He forgave his parents for it, though, because he knew his mom’s situation was grim.

You can compliment me all you want, Mom, he thought to himself.

After the dishes were all washed, Mäks leaned against the counter.

“I’ve got a friend coming over today.”

“A friend?” Mom echoed in surprise, knowing her son usually preferred to be on his own. “Is it that boy Roland again? We’ve got nothing to offer him to eat; not even dumplings or sour cream.”

Mäks laughed.

“No, a different friend,” he said. “And it’s a good thing we don’t have dumplings or sour cream, because this friend of mine eats just about anything other than that.”

“Wait, so you really have a friend?”

Mom asked. “Is he in your class?”

Mäks nodded.

“What’s his name? Do we know him?” Dad questioned.

“You don’t; they just started going to our school.”

“But a name, give us a name,” Mom prodded. She wanted to know who the new boy was.

“Sirli,” Mäks replied. “She and her mom just moved here from Rõuge, down south.”

Mäks’s parents pretended as if it was the most normal thing in the world for their son, who hadn’t had a single friend at school in the last six years, to suddenly form a friendship. And for it to be with a girl, not a boy.

“She lives near the grocery store. We’ve walked home from school together a couple of times,” Mäks added. “And I sit next to her in math class. Sometimes in English, too.”

“Is she smart?” Dad asked.

Mäks shrugged.

“I dunno. Smarter than most, I guess. But she used to go to a sports school and is amazing at the high jump. Our PE teacher said she’ll be in the Olympics ten years from now.”

"We should still offer her something to eat," Mom said resolutely. "Maybe I'll make mushroom pie. We've got some dough and fried chanterelles in the freezer."

"That'd be great," Mäks said. "I can help you roll out the dough and chop the mushrooms."

He took the ingredients from the freezer and set them on the windowsill to thaw.

Sirli rang the doorbell at two o'clock on the dot. By then, the pie was ready. Mom called them straight into the kitchen and told them to take a seat at the table.

"What can I offer you to drink?" she asked. "Juice? Tea? Or do you drink coffee?"

"Tea, please," Sirli replied. "I do drink coffee sometimes, but only before competitions."

Mom flipped on the electric kettle and started rummaging through items on the shelf, looking for the tea. She peered at Sirli from the corner of her eye the entire time. The girl was slender and had long, dark hair and big, brown eyes.

It's like she stepped right off the cover of a fashion magazine, she thought.

"What do you do outside of sports?" Mom asked.

"Not much," Sirli replied. "We didn't have any big shopping centers down south, so my mom and I like to go and wander around those. We usually don't buy anything, just look."

"That's nice, too," Mom said. "You should only buy things you really need."

She served the tea and started to leave the room.

"Aren't you going to have some pie with us, Mom?" Mäks asked.

The question took her completely by surprise.

"You really want us to all sit together?" she asked. "Don't you want some time by yourselves?"

Mäks and Sirli exchanged a meaningful glance and said, almost in unison, "No."

The boy blushed and quickly explained the situation.

"Mom, Sirli and I are both thirteen years old. We're in the sixth grade. Sirli didn't come over for us to be together; she came so we could talk to you."

Tears filled Mom's eyes. She hadn't heard anything so wonderful in a very long time.

"I'll go get Dad," she said, and quickly left the room.

"I think your mom thinks we're boyfriend and girlfriend," Sirli giggled.

Mäks blushed.

"I swear my parents are totally normal otherwise. I've got no idea where she came up with that idea."

Soon, Mäks's parents came into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

"How's school going?" Dad asked Sirli. "I heard you like athletics."

"I do," she replied, then looked at Mäks and gently kicked him under the table. She reckoned now that everyone had a slice of pie in front of them, it was the right time to reveal why they were actually there.

"Mom, Dad," Mäks began. "There's a different reason why Sirli came to visit today."

"Does the pie not taste good?" Mom asked, worried.

"Mom, I'm not talking about the pie," Mäks said. "It's not about food at all. Though this is really delicious. Especially because I picked most of the mushrooms in it."

That made everyone laugh.

"There's something we need to tell you. Both of you. But you're not allowed to say anything until we're finished talking."

"Oh, Lord—did something bad happen at school?" Mom asked in horror.

"No, no, everything at school is fine," Mäks reassured her. "We want to talk about you and Dad. And about how we think we know how to help you. So that Mom gets better and Dad keeps his job."

"Oh, Margus, my darling boy," Mom sighed. "Nobody can help me anymore. The very best doctors in the country have studied me and that's just the way it has to be."

"And in my case, the only person who can help me is me," Dad said. "I'm the one who should lose at least ten kilos and work out nonstop for the next six months—maybe then I'd pass the exams. But today's Saturday and the exams are on Monday."

"That's just what we wanted to talk to you about," Sirli said. "Margus found this place, this weird place that changes time."

"It changes how much time you've lived," Mäks added.