

Once There Was a Way to Get Back Home

by Jeanne Holtzman

My daughter tiptoes into the room, and I pretend to be asleep in the recliner. She whispers, "I'll be right back, mom." I hear the front door close, a car door slam and an engine start. Now is my chance. She won't be gone long.

I push myself out of the chair, unfolding my old and creaky bones. I'm tired of boots. I pull a jacket from the hook, leave my walker by the door, and go out in my slippers. I follow the call of the chickadees into the woods. The path is covered with patchy snow and mud, and the sharp scent of newly unfrozen water mingles with the richness of warming earth. I fill my lungs and expel stale recycled air. My jaw and shoulders loosen. I come closer to exquisite emptiness.

I hobble along, feet sucked by mud or crunching snow. I am untethered. I have no compass, no clock, no map, not even any breadcrumbs. Squirrels run spiral chases up oaks, and unseen birds chitter in bare intertwining branches. The first slash of green pushes up beside a tiny brook.

I sit down on a large rock in the sunlight and wait. I will sit here forever. The trees will bud and leaf, the forest will grow a carpet of green, the birds will build nests with my hair. Perhaps a prince will pass by, or Hansel and Gretel or The White Rabbit, and all that will be left of me will be a pile of pretty white bones. But I become restless. It won't be that easy. I get up and keep walking.

I walk until I come to a fork in the road. I cannot remember the poem. It was once my favorite, I think. The air trembles. I hesitate, peer down each path, and mutter aloud, "Which path should I take?"

And from above a voice, a distinctly British voice answers, "That depends on where you want to go."

I stagger back and look up. Leaning against the trunk, legs stretched and ankles crossed, John Lennon lounges on a stout branch. He grins like the Cheshire cat, round glasses glinting in the sunlight.

"Oh!" I say, "I'm not really sure that I care."

"Then it doesn't really matter which way you go!" he says.

"As long as I get somewhere," I explain.

"You're sure to do that," says John, "if you walk long enough." And he disappears.

I walk on, not noticing which path I take. My feet are cold and wet, and my legs begin to wobble. I pick up a large stick to steady myself, and keep walking. I slide on ice covered by wet leaves and fall, but nothing breaks so I get back up. I walk until I can walk no longer, and then I find a spot, a small clearing a bit higher than the path, and I lie down in the sun.

I hear robins digging through the leaf mulch, water trickling. Farther away a train whistle, an airplane engine, but all around me, a soft echo, "The magical mystery tour is dying to take you away, dying to take you away, take you today." I am slipping, slipping into peace, melting into the earth. I am almost there.

And then I feel the thudding of footsteps and hear a shrill, insistent yelping.

"Mom! Mom!"

I should have covered myself with leaves. I should have wandered farther from the path. The birds scatter. The singing stops. My daughter sits beside me, panting, shaking me.

"Mom. Mom, are you okay?"

I open my eyes.

"Oh, thank God. Don't worry. I'm calling for help." She yells directions into her cell phone.

I look up and see John sitting in the tree above me, legs dangling. He winks at me, shrugs, and sings, "You say goodbye and I say hello."

