

2021 WINTER WRITING CONTEST ENTRY 17

Escaping into Green

Buried in the remote and tangled recesses of her mind, the thought's first flutter was infinitesimally small. The woods of her youth had looked different from the park forest she walked through now, hand-in-hand with her husband, keeping pace with their sons, but still... Something about the vertical lines of the tree trunks, the leaves creating a lively ceiling overhead, momentarily jogged her memory.

Most likely, it took getting out of the city, away from the confines of their home, for it to happen. The flutter came from a cobwebbed corner of a decaying treehouse, long forgotten, where the thought remained lodged. The treehouse was not the usual kind: for lack of low branches, her father had built it on the ground, surrounding the base of an enormous pine tree, and equipped it with a flat rooftop and handrail. Clubhouse, ship, dungeon, castle — it had hosted her and her brother's imaginations for years. When had she turned her back on that glorious structure? Surely it was around the same time that fear began replacing the certainty she'd land on her feet upon jumping from the top. Forgetting the treehouse's majesty was set in motion by the arrival of self-doubt, which would be followed by the pain of self-consciousness, and later, the hopeful distraction of self-improvement. At least she was never bored in those days. Discoveries were plentiful along the path through the woods that led away from the treehouse: friends, boys, mirrors. But with each, she shrank.

The notion was so slight that first time that she didn't perceive it consciously; instead, she noticed how she suddenly had to fill her lungs with air, mouth open, the need too urgent to take the time to breathe in correctly through her nose. She hoped no one saw her.

The next time, it flashed boldly across her mind, and the recognition of it brought tears, the silently gushing kind, leaving her embarrassed at her oversensitivity. What was she crying about? Nothing — really, nothing!

And then one day, the nagging thought snuck in under a bout of fury, which had erupted so quickly even she was left stunned. As she hugged her family and asked for forgiveness, the thought tumbled out of its neglected corner and appeared, whole, in plain view of her mind's eye.

She stroked the sweet creatures in a heap on her lap. Her own childhood — spent running through the woods, flying down the backyard zipline, biking madly over hills, hunkering down in the treehouse — seemed nearly limitless in retrospect, blissfully unmonitored, though her mother must have sometimes watched from the small kitchen window. She had felt strong, agile, free. And yet despite her feral youth, here she was, fully domesticated, but for the one wild thought. Her own children often paced in circles within the imposing walls of the apartment, her eyes always following them, her hands always corralling them, her mouth always directing them. Would they ever know how good it could feel to be truly oneself?

Because as far from it as she was now, at least when she tried, she could remember what that felt like. The kid version of her had known who she was and where she was going. And now? She cringed at the thought of her childhood self, who would not be pleased to discover what she had become. The mind-numbing, repetitive actions of her day sometimes made her wonder why she had gone to school at all. *Who needs an education to turn other people's socks right side out?* Sometimes she steeped in angry self-pity; immediately after, she felt the appropriate amount of shame for her lack of gratitude for all the good in her life.

But she knew she had not so much fallen into a trap as hiked into one, happily and naively, her trekking poles a composite of perfectionism and optimism, patriarchy and competitiveness, hard-headedness and a desperate need to feel worthy. She had grown up hearing double standards decried, but absorbing them anyway. She and her husband had built a life on his salary and her commitment to stay home with the kids. Now, they both felt the weight of years of abandoning parts of themselves in order to keep things running.

She understood why parents lived vicariously through their kids, why so many adults' greatest ambitions were carried on the backs of children. On especially hard days, when the sensation best worded as *It's too late for me* would waft through her brain, her attention would automatically switch to her hopes for her sons. As if, as a parent, she was programmed to move on from her own unaccomplished dreams, the salve for sacrificing all lofty goals being her babies' success. It made sense — biologically, historically — but it felt like passing the buck. Hadn't her own parents poured themselves into creating opportunities for her to reach her potential? What good had it done? At this point, it seemed only to have served to let her know how disappointed she should be in herself.

She stood up from the couch and, with an apologetic grimace at her husband, took the boys' hands in hers. "Come on," she said, urging them energetically towards and out the door, "Let's run down the street! Let's run fast and yell!"

"What?" one of them asked. "I don't want to!"

"It's hot out here," said the other unhappily. "I'm sweating!"

"Guys," she said, tired. She reached out and ruffled their hair, for once not irritated by their mood. Where had she gone? And how could she come back? She wasn't sure, but she suddenly believed there might be a way.

Her husband joined them on the porch and put an arm around her. She leaned into him. "I need change," she said. "We all do. Let's get out of here. Live a little. Move somewhere new."

"Where?" the kids demanded, surprised at her declaration, and curious.

"Somewhere... *green*," she answered.