

## The Fairy Ring

I haven't walked alone for ages. Four years, five, maybe even ten or more. There's always been someone with me. I moved in with my first husband right after high school. He worked long hours, so I did have quite a bit of alone time, but I no longer lived near a forest like I did where I grew up. It was a peaceful thing to be able to step out my door and into the woods. No trails to guide me other than the ones forged by deer or other animals; a place where I could lose myself and find myself at the same time. It's been far too long.

I walk these wooded paths now, trying to find the inner solace that I once knew. Trying to hear and sense myself—the one who's gotten buried under the never ending pressures of life. But, as always, worries bombard me and there is the ever pressing weight of things left undone: all those chores and errands and other obligations that needed to be done weeks ago, some of them even months. Can't they all just leave me alone—just for an hour? I want to *exist* for awhile—nothing else. But there will never be any freedom, not really. They'll always be here, haunting me.

I walk at a slow, steady pace. The sun tries to reach me but it's filtered by the canopy of leaves. Crunch, crunch, crunch goes the gravel beneath my feet, a monotonous rhythm. It isn't natural. It is grating in my brain. I stop and stare longingly at the deep woods around me. It wants to pull me in. I look quickly at the path behind me and in front of me. There is no one there. Who says I have to stick to a chosen path? That's not the way to enjoy the woods. I check again if anyone's watching—always afraid of breaking the rules—and step gingerly yet brazenly into the soft hunched over ankle-length wet grass.

Instantly I feel free. The leafy uneven ground easily carries me further from the course gravel path. The dead wet leaves make almost no sound even as I step so heavily upon them. But as my feet remember the tricks to walking gracefully in the wildness of the woods, I step lighter and more quickly, easily avoiding the broken sticks and little grabby shrubs and intuitively expecting every hidden little dip. I, so clumsy and awkward on something as simple and normal as hard, smooth pavement, become as graceful as a wood elf when I step into the forest.

I am reveling in the feeling. Remembering how I used to run at top speed through the woods around my house, I feel an overwhelming urge to do it again now, just to prove that I still can. I glance at the bright path, look back to the dim woods, seek out the clearest looking route and then run. Over and over I dodge living trees, leap over the fallen ones and feel the occasional tugging of underbrush trying in vain to stop me. Sometimes thin lines of cobwebs cross my face and I, who would normally be horrified by such a thing anywhere else, simply brush them aside, never slowing my pace. For a moment, it gets denser, the underbrush so close together that I have to slow down and pick my way through. Some of them are prickles, but I take their bites like someone who's been scratched by them a thousand times, which I guess I have, only a long time ago.

I can see a patch of sunlight up ahead and a wide expanse that is relatively devoid of trees. I push my way into the clearing of long, drooping grasses and tall and twisty pale green plants that look like strands of seaweed banished somehow from the ocean floor, and gaze upon one impossibly enormous oak tree near the center. I stop, my mouth hanging open in awe at it, wondering how old it could possibly be. It looks like four trees all rolled into one. Each of the four trunks spiral out from one thick center close to the ground. Horizontal branches hang from

them, one of them so close to one of the trunks that a large sort of callous has developed where they meet. I walk closer to it and am still fairly far from the trunk when I have to duck under its wide branches of leaves. A wind passes through and cool drops of water shake free from somewhere up above and find their way to me. One hits my cheek and I leave it be. Tiny bugs are flying all about; I see them when they touch the sunlight. They look like little faeries.

“Fairy folks are in old oaks.” Certainly, if there has ever been a faerie tree, this is it. I can almost see them hanging from the branches now, dancing in the leaves, and peeping out of tiny holes. I step closer to it, lay my hand upon its rough, dusty bark and slowly walk around it, soaking it in from every view. I am behind it, looking up at the green filtered blue sky when I lift my foot and stop. I look down. Just where I was about to step, poking out of the sea of fallen leaves, grows a large circle of white mushrooms. My heart skips. A fairy ring. I’ve read so much about them—the scientific reasoning for them and, the reason for my interest, the stories. I’ve soaked up volumes and volumes of folklore, fascinated by the myths of faeries and too often wishing the stories were true. I’ve always loved the mystery of them, their magic, their freedom, their otherworldliness., and the idea that there’s more to this world than ordinary mundane things—that there’s a magic out there, things and worlds to be discovered.

Faeries are unhampered by rules of societies; they are wild and wicked and glorious and never have any cares at all. Their moods change like quicksilver and they can be whatever they momentarily desire. They live in the twilight, they never work, they live merely for pleasure, their food and clothing and other wants are leaves and other woodsy things transformed by glamour. They are never sick, they never age, they live in a selfish dream of never ending indulgence without the slightest consequence. They are everything that I can never be.

Maybe it's all real. It sure seems real in such a lonely place as this. Maybe if I step inside the ring I'll see them dancing round and round, never slowing, never stopping. I'll be compelled to dance too, no cares at all for what might happen or what is happening in the real world. So many years I have hoped to come across a real fairy ring. Every mushroom I've ever seen peeking from the grass has gotten a careful scrutiny—is it a fairy ring? No, just a clump of ordinary mushrooms. I could only look at them in pictures and wonder whether all the stories about them were true. I would wish and hope and wonder lots of things, but the biggest question still remained: would I step into one if I ever saw one?

When I was young and had no cares, I would have done it without hesitation. Let the faeries take me, make me their own; it would be a great adventure. But time is a fickle thing in Faerie and in a moment of dancing, an entire lifetime can go by. If you do find your way back, one hundred years might have passed and all that you knew and loved would be gone. Or it might happen that you're the one who ages while the rest of the world stands still. And so here you are, so old and weak that perhaps you cannot even move from the spot where you once had entered; and there you die, slowly and regretfully now that the adventure's over. Who could ever tell what would happen and which of all the stories is true?

Regardless of the possible outcomes, I am drawn to this ring. It's the unknown that attracts me. Just think of all the things I would see and learn and experience—things that I can't even begin to imagine. But I am scared to make the choice. All my life I've run from decisions and did everything I could to just let nature take its course. That way, if life steers me wrong, the only thing I can blame myself for is inaction. And for me, inaction is a lot easier to deal with than

making a wrong decision. This is how my first marriage failed. This is how my son was born.

This is how I live my life.

I have to decide. I can't wait around for a strong breeze to nudge me into it or for a rabid deer to wander by and conveniently wrestle me into the ring. I need to do this for myself and accept the fact that I am not perfect and will most certainly make mistakes. Everyone does. Life goes on. I know this. So then, do I keep this stupid world of time and work and routine or do I take the world of freedom, adventure and real magic? In these blunt terms, it seems like such an easy decision. But how do I know it's even real? What if I gather every last ounce of my courage to leave this world behind and, when I step in, nothing happens? I'd find myself standing stupidly in an ordinary circle of mushrooms, only glad that no one is there to see my foolishness. And then the reality would set in—true reality—no more dreams of faeries or magic because I had just proven their nonexistence. Science would be right, and what it tells us is really all there is to know. How could I live in such a world, where everything is explained and you take things only as you see them? I am dead without my dreams.

So then, the other question is, am I happy with where life's taken me? Am I content to take the ride a little longer? Will I be happy if I leave my crowded world of school and work and family? I think of work and homework and all those millions of other things I *have* to do and want to jump right in. But would the guilt of having chosen myself over my son and husband haunt me for the rest of my days? I know I shouldn't live for other people—I've been told that time and time again. But I think of my son with his bright blue eyes and crazy laugh and my loving husband with his green eyes that can see right through me and know that I could never go anywhere without them. They are never obligations to me; they are the sunlight in my life. They

are my true anchors here and any adventure I may take must include them by my side. Whatever other hells this world creates for me, I endure it all to be with them.

Perhaps someday we'll come across a fairy ring together in some twilight meadow far away. And, maybe having nothing else to tie us here quite so strongly, we'll take each other's hands and ride the magic together. But will the magic work then? In all the stories that I've ever read, entering Faerie requires solitude. Well, if that's the case, so be it. I'll keep living and I'll keep dreaming; that's all I really need. As long as the mere possibility of faeries remains, I'll be somewhat content.

I've been still for so long; a nervous chipmunk skitters down the tree, very near my hand. He stares at me, startled at how close he has allowed himself to get to me, the great lumbering giant. He has a frozen moment of indecision before he flees back into the safety of the leafy branches. I watch him go, a little sad.

I look back down. Somehow, my foot is still hovering there, just above the fairy ring. Slowly, I set it down, willfully and carefully outside the ring.

"Maybe next time," I say to the air. And with one last lingering look, I make my way out of the woods, and into my life.