

“Dirt Path”

Rebecca was the adventurous one: the first to try something new and expand her horizons, approaching life with such a freedom of spirit I could only hope to echo as I signed up for soccer and gymnastics classes, praying that I would not be left behind. I was eager to avoid the world that seemed much too big, happy to escape into *The Secret Garden*, or imagine myself as the fifth *Little Women* sister. I hemmed and hawed at the advent of another adventure, certain that this time, I would fall to my doom in the tiny creek that traced the woods behind our home.

Rebecca was always good at ignoring my nonsense - the quest began and we were off to our father's house.

We left behind the rhododendrons and bluebells, hydrangeas and daffodils, lined prettily against the herb garden that Rebecca and I had planted that year. Ahead of us, tulip poplar and oak trees loomed, separated by a thin dirt path where vegetation no longer grew.

We petted and patted and cooed at the neighbor's dog as we passed through the iron gate that separated our backyard from the world beyond, leaving rainboot tracks mirroring one another.

Rebecca, forging ahead, while I followed dutifully behind.

We spotted dark creatures and glittering treasures in the wood, careful to avoid what I swore were bears. Our trail was well-trod; we only dared to veer from our path in search of the shiny objects that glinted in the sun. We found glass vases and bottles, filled with murky liquids, empty baseballs and basketballs, and plenty of biological treasures. I was preferential to acorns and leaves: Rebecca, bird feathers. Plumage of crows and bluebirds abounded in our forest; we marveled at the opaque blackness of the crow and the thin black line that delineated the bright blue and white of the bluebird. Stuffed into our front and back pockets, these lost oddities were

carried throughout our journey, relics of the day's adventure, later to become featured decorations in our baby house.

A fallen tree had to be crossed in order to clear the feared creek, which featured a depth of two inches. Rebecca, sure as rain, crossed the natural bridge, one foot placed in front of the other. My passage was certainly not as graceful, as I slid myself along the tree, legs wrapped around its sides for balance.

Free of the creek, we followed our thinning dirt path, which became increasingly steep, anticipating snack time and the crooked tree house.

We marveled at the height of the bamboo forest, and listened to the furry creatures that scurried amongst the fallen leaves. We clicked our tongues and stamped our feet as we passed through the dense wood, eager for our next landmark: the tree house. Perched on the top of a hill, the tree house slanted precariously to the left, catching the sun on its dusty and cracked windowpane.

There was an air of mystery surrounding the thing - tales of children as little as we were climbing up and down its crooked wooden stairs. We pretended that Rapunzel lived there, and was only waiting for her Prince to come and rescue her from the slanted tower. We imagined that treasure could be found only by the one brave enough to prop open its creaking door, that drummed out a beat in the wind. Humming and whistling, we carried on past the little house to find a place to eat. We trudged up green hills. Rebecca, athletic and sure of herself, gingerly avoided the tree roots and crevices that grabbed at my toes and nipped my ankles, forcing my nose into the dirt.

We ate sandwiches bursting with peanut butter and fruit strips, savoring the sticky sweetness that clung to our fingertips. Our grubby hands swung back and forth as we breached the peak of the hill, past swinging vines and ancient maples, to happen upon our second childhood home.

We were reminded of our favorite book, *Each Little Bird that Sings*, where the protagonist of the story, Comfort, held picnics with her best friend on the crest of a hill, overlooking their fictional city. Here were two of those same little girls, whose view consisted of a Dead End street sign and suburban houses, outfitted with little gardens and plant shelves for each rectangular window. Our world was not fictional, but magical all the same.

The outdoors were waiting for us, with tree branches outstretched, and plenty of wild organisms to play with and learn from. Piles of evergreen pines and straw became pillows for our makeshift homes. Mud became cake and pies; firewood, places to sit. Clumps of moss operated as linens and blankets.

At Mom's house, we had the dense forest to explore, at Dad's, a backyard, and a mile-long adventure to take up our days between the two homes.

My twin sister and I are twenty-one now. As we continue down our dirt path, Rebecca forges ahead, while I follow dutifully behind.