

The Path is a Story

There is this path, a fantasy path, a storytale path. It's in a wood right now, but I think at some point it might come out of the wood and go down to the sea. The wood is dense and quiet, but there is birdsong.

The path is a dirt path but wide enough to walk on comfortably. It is occasionally lumpy with tree roots, but not so lumpy that I am in danger of tripping.

It's a warm day, not too hot, and the path and wood are shimmering with dappled light. It's autumn, early enough to be warm, late enough for the leaves to begin to change colour. Hips and haws are blood red and brilliant.

Autumn is a good time to walk a path. My brain still expects that at this time of year we should be going to school, trauma never really leaves you, so the fact that we are not in school, but walking along this path, makes me and my brain incredibly happy. Also, it's a weekday so everyone who isn't in school is at work or at least, elsewhere, and I am completely alone. This is also a cause for joy.

Because this path is a fantasy path, my ideal path, a dream path, there is no pain. I am walking along the path and nothing hurts. My knees are fine, there is no pain in my feet, no nagging back stiffness, no shoulder ache. There is no pain anywhere and I am walking really well. Swinging along at a comfortable pace, breathing the lovely air, smelling the first faint musk of autumnal rot and mushroom scent.

I am walking a long way today. The path unfolds before me, wandering and curving through the wood. I feel like I could walk forever, stepping along in a rhythm that generates as much energy as it takes, so that my internal battery is always on 98%.

It's important that the path goes a long way, because distance allows the body and mind to come into a communion. I stop thinking after a while and just become being.

There is the lovely rhythm of pacing, muscles and joints relaxed and warm. The pleasure of quenching my thirst, stopping for a moment to drink water. The pleasure of feeling a soft hunger, not a hunger that needs attending to yet, but later food will be marvellous in a way that only happens outside after a day's walking.

I pace along the path. There is so much beauty. The woody smells, the sweet trills and chirps of songbirds, cawing of crows and alarm calls of jays. Stepping into places of deep shadow and the faintest chill felt on my body then stepping into patches of warm sunshine. Fluffy seedheads of old man's beard and scarlet hips of the dog rose garland the edges of the path. Old stumps are home to colonies of fungi and dark hollies shine sharp and silken in the sun.

There, away in the wood is a small herd of fallow deer quietly grazing. I stand stock still, silent, awed by the sight. The buck, creamy white in contrast to his fawn, freckled does lifts his head, barks a short alert. The herd slip silently, regally, away into the trees.

I walk on. Comfortable, at peace, quiet, moving freely. Here in the world where I belong. Moving at walking pace, travelling the

path, going somewhere, coming from somewhere, being here in this place, in this moment. Is this freedom? Is this reality? Is this how I should be spending my life because it feels, when I am walking as if walking is the only thing I ever need to do. It feels like walking is what is being asked of me, all that life ever meant to demand of me. To walk.

Should I have been a pilgrim, a nomad? Did I get it wrong?

Because walking is not easy. The fantasy path is real, but the experience of walking without pain or discomfort is a dream. I'll do it anyway, walk and love the walking, but some days, when it hurts or when I am not able to leave the house because here there are people and the path, that path, the fantasy path, is very far away, unattainable.

Do I hurt because I am not walking? Am I being punished for not walking? Have I broken an unwritten contract with life in choosing a desk, a chair, the comfort of a life lived mostly at home? Is my physical disability my fault? If I just got up and walked would it go? I think not. I tried it once, for a few weeks, and it was always difficult. But the thought is always there, that my pain is my fault and maybe I didn't walk far enough, long enough to heal?

So maybe walking for days, for miles is a dream. But the path is not. The path is always real and there are countless paths waiting for me. Maybe my walking is not always perfect, pain free and beautiful, but then the path is not always beautiful either. The path gets choked with bramble, overgrown with nettle, is littered. The path gets noisy with road traffic, is guarded by an angry dog, passes into the city and is lost. The path is diverted, fenced, blocked and gated. And still it is the

path. Walking along it is just walking. Any pain, or discomfort, or ugliness or beauty or bird music or rain, or sunshine or storm is simply part of the path. Because the path is a story. A story without any message, without any end.

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