

Renee Norman

Travel

It hardly seemed worth all the bother, but still she checked the time when she woke, tired from another night of wakeful, thought-full sleep, and insisted that they all rise, dress appropriately and hurry down to another rushed, cold-cereal breakfast.

Rushed so they would be ready in good time: teeth brushed, hair brushed, lunches in hand, boots and raincoats donned, umbrellas open, rushing down the driveway past two perfectly presentable and working vehicles to walk the path in a relentless downpour.

Hurry up, please, girls! Why don't you wear pants, it's raining heavily?

Oh, do we have to? I hate wearing pants. I want to wear a dress.

Fine, but you'll have to wear tights.

Oh, I hate putting tights on! Will you do it for me?

No, I hate putting tights on, too, and I have to do the baby's.

She's not a baby anymore, you know.

She is to me and so are you.

Then put my tights on, too!

Ha! Clever! You can always wear pants like I suggested, you know.

See you downstairs in five minutes flat, dressed, please.

I don't know why we have to walk, anyway, nobody else does, it's dumb, and look at all that dumb rain.

At first such protests by the children had been vociferous and relentless on the wettest days. They were tired, they protested, couldn't they just be driven to school, there wasn't enough time to play before it was time to leave, and so on...

But she persisted, driven by some unconscious need to prove to them that there was another way to travel, that there was a whole life outside that they would never know about if they didn't walk it, see it close up, feel it in the wet downpour which threatened to soak them through their nylon coats and umbrellas.

The sunny days were never a problem. It was easier to wake in the sun-filled rooms and the children were eager to slip light shoes on their feet and bask in the comforting sunlight which countered even the most biting cold or wind. Those days they counted themselves lucky to rush past the neighbouring houses on the crescent, up the walkway to the stairs which led to the path in the woods—with thick, dense forest brush on one side, where bears were sometimes known to come foraging for food, and polite, clean-looking townhouses uniformly arranged on the other side. Leaving those townhouses far behind, they followed the trampled weeds of their favorite shortcut through the woods, the surrounding brush lush with pussywillows and hot pink salmonberry flowers in early spring. Through this forest trail they would walk, eventually scaling a rocky, earth-filled hill which led them to the pedestrian light across a busy street, continuing up another hill where they breathed and coughed and sputtered in the exhaust fumes of cars speeding by much too fast. Then they turned past the corner gas station and car wash—which always halted their journey if there was a car being washed. They loved watching the large blue mops spitting soap suds and water in a wet dog-haired spun frenzy. Up the parking lot of a large apartment building they would continue, where they had to be cautious of the occasional car bursting unseen out of the cave of the underground garage. Then they strode across the church parking lot where the preschool teacher's maroon van was always parked, up one final street of newish, pink-stuccoed houses. Finally, they picked their way through the gravel-filled schoolmade walkway between a canopy of overgrown undergrowth and across the top field of the schoolground to their ultimate destination.

They had discovered much on these foot adventures, which she felt certain they would have missed if they joined the others barrelling past (often waving to them or offering them a ride which they declined) in familiar, popular cars. They now knew the names of many colorful flowers, found earthworms and snails and odd-shaped rocks. They lunged for and fought over lucky pennies, or nickels, and once, a quarter. They had taken home for washing the lost bounty of dropped childhood treasures: pretty hair barrettes, small, flat plastic dolls once part of some dollhouse or other, a small, red-striped doll dress, and other finds.

Look, Mommy! I found a lucky penny! That's the third one I've found so far.
I'll give it to you, Mommy, for all of us to share, but you
keep it in your pocket and don't take it out ever, all right?

A little plastic doll! Can I take it home and keep it, please, please?

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I'll make little clothes for it out of construction paper and a kleenex bed, and can I maybe use a washcloth, too, Mommy? Oh, isn't she sweet? If you look really carefully, you can see she has little eyes under all the dirt.

No, you can't have it just because you're the youngest, right, Mommy? I found it. Finders, keepers, losers, weepers. Oh, stop crying, I'll let you have a turn, but *not* until I have first, okay?

So it began that eventually when they reached their destination, whether their journey had been smoothly sun-warmed or intrepidly rain-pelted or even beautifully snow-drifted, they felt some inner sense of accomplishment, confirmed by the satisfied looks on their faces, the refusal to even consider some alternative mode of transport, the disappointment when occasional illness prevented them from setting out upon their daily adventure.

One gray mist-enshrouded morning, she woke with a sense of foreboding, a presentiment that no matter what, she should change the rules and not allow any departure by foot, and she quietly mentioned this to the children.

I think we should consider scrapping our walk today, and just go by car.

The noisy protests weakened any resolve arising out of her inexplicable fears.

That's not fair! You said we *had* to walk, no matter what the weather. We want to do it, we'll just take umbrellas. You're the one who always says not to back down from things when they seem a little hard. We *like* to walk, it's fun.

"All right then," she replied, defenceless against their righteous onslaught. "Dress quickly, and come down for breakfast."

But as she poured that morning's choice of dry cereal into brightly coloured plastic bowls, she could not shake the feeling that there was something terribly wrong, that she should just insist they all stay home.

By the time everyone assembled for their usual cold-touched, warm-voiced morning meal, she felt she was powerless to prevent the day from proceeding as usual, just as she had implemented and structured it not so long ago, following instincts that at the time had been strong in her and true.

As they trooped up the street to the walkway which led to the forest, chattering happily about the purple and white crocuses, warning each other boisterously to avoid the dog poo, she tried to shake off the sense of doom and gloom which was so strong it was a presence walking nonchalantly right along with her family, sidestepping the dog droppings.

Everything seemed normal. It was another rain-encased day, and their colorful, closely held array of umbrellas accidentally bumped and brushed the

water off the hanging branches of cherry blossom trees. The umbrellas seemed like little colored parachute-shaped bumper cars driving haphazardly up the roadway of plants and flowers that lined their course.

By the time they scaled the walkway stairs and arrived at the foot of the woods, her breathing was quick and panicky, and the force of the rain seemed to quicken with each new puff and pant. She scrutinized the woods through the raindrops blinding her view, dripping off her glasses. A wind blew up, and they all concentrated on holding on to the blowing umbrellas. The pelt of the rain intensified, and her children giggled, delighting in being blown along by the wind and rain.

Look, Mommy, my umbrella's turning inside outside and I can hardly hold it any—

A strong gust carried the ruined umbrella off, and the cries of delight changed to dismay, and tears.

Oh, no! Oh, no! It's blowing away!

Before she could even bend to console that disappearing umbrella's small owner, or offer the shelter of her own apparatus, the rest of all their umbrellas flipped their spokes upward like crazed flowering creatures, and an even stronger gust blew them off, one, two, three...

Now all of the children were crying, and getting very much wetter with the force of the buffeting wind and the pounding downpour. She quickly decided they should turn around and head for home, as they were all far too drenched to even consider completing the walk to school, and this time there were no noisy protests at her suggestion. But they could not find the walkway stairs, even though they had just entered the woods up those stairs only moments ago.

Panicked, she tried to seem calm, so as not to alarm the children, but they immediately sensed her concern and pinpointed its cause.

Mommy, where's the walkway? It should be here, shouldn't it?
It doesn't quite look the same. How will we get home?

She quickly allayed their fears, fighting her own rising sense of dismay, saying that they would simply find another way out of the woods, up by the end of the path toward the pedestrian light.

She turned and guided her small troop towards the direction of the busy street which signalled the end of the footworn path in the woods. They briskly quickened their pace in anticipation of the sight of the cars speeding by the road as seen through the spaces in the overhanging tree branches.

They marched on, wet and disheartened by the ceaseless rain and wind, the children soaked through and crying loudly now, and she knew that they should

have reached that light by now, were walking on and on far too long, but said nothing, silent and growing more alarmed.

The children's wails grew louder, longer, siren-like, blending into one long sustained minor note whose sound was held by a foot on a loud pedal, an eerie, other-worldly sound in the pummelling rain of the forest. Suddenly the children's forms rose in the air like their blown-away umbrellas, and coats flying up like the fabric on the upside-down spokes of those broken umbrellas, their small bodies drifted upward.

Horried, she stood frozen for several seconds, rooted to the ground like one of the old trees of the forest, watching dazed as her children seemed to float away. A flood of energy surged through her, maternal instinct maneuvering her into motion, and she desperately clutched at the little feet rising higher and higher in the air. With that chorus of high-pitched cries ringing unmistakably in her ears, she clawed at air, and her hands sliced through no substance at all, the children a hallucinatory vision of small legs and flapping coats and waving arms, dear little balloon faces recognizable from within the centre of each wafting image. As suddenly as their ascent began, the children's forms (or, what she had believed to be the children) disappeared from view, the caterwauling wails winding down to one last despondent note cut off in mid-stream.

The rain stopped abruptly. A great silence punctuated the forest floor with its exclamation of possibility. The sun shone through the leaves of the dripping tree branches. Puffs of rising, smoky drying air rose from flattened tree-trunk stumps scattered here and there throughout the woods. She felt warmed by the sun filtering through the foliage.

It was then that she began to understand, and feeling relieved that the children were actually quite safe, warm, and dry, knowing that the ordinary morning ministrations were very likely being continued right at this very moment somehow, she relaxed somewhat and began to enjoy being by herself in the woods.

Soon her clothes began to feel less sopping wet and simply cool and soft upon her skin. She breathed in the worm-scented, pinecone air and closed her eyes, standing quite still for a few seconds, contemplating.

She sensed that her next move when she opened her eyes would bring her to some trail which led out of the woods, but stalling, she delayed, and instead, lifted her face, eyes still closed, to feel the warming air lick her face.

When she opened her eyes at last, she was not the least surprised to see the concrete walkway stairs, full of small puddles leftover from the downpour. She lingered for a minute longer, secure in the thought that these sturdy stairs descended to the walkway and eventually would lead her home when she was ready. She perceived that they would be there even if not in full view, even if she chose to descend them later, even if she decided to explore on her own some more and stroll in the forest.

Feeling confident, alive, and very much in control of herself, she walked past the walkway stairs in another direction, towards the deepest growth of the

forest, eschewing the pedestrian light and busy street which was at the opposite end of the woods' path. Delighting in this unexpected turn of events, she continued her travel, walking, seeing a whole outdoor life close up, feeling it with her clearheaded senses, relishing her solitude. She did not even look backwards once at the vanishing walkway, knowing she could find it again easily when it was time, understanding and accepting her own adventure in time, her earlier sense of fear and foreboding evaporating as hastily as the rain had stopped.

In the distance several small umbrellas lay turned inside out, ruined, their parachute colors streaked with ribbons of still-wet material.