

Nature's Prestidigitations

Jim carried Violet on his shoulders as they walked toward the forest. She was getting bigger, and soon the fairytales would be nothing more than stories. Soon, the magic of nature would be revealed merely as sleight of hand.

"What do you hope to see today?" he asked her.

"I want to see squirrels," she said.

"We have squirrels in our backyard," he said.

"I like these squirrels better," she said. "What about you?"

"I like the pond," he said. "Sometimes you see a turtle."

"Do you think we'll see a fairy?" she asked.

Jim shrugged. "They're hard to see. They might not even be in this forest."

"Oh," she said. "We'll still see a squirrel, right?"

"We'll try," he said.

They went deeper into the woods, the branches of the budding trees slicing apart the sunlight above. Things chirped: toads, crickets, birds, Jim wasn't sure, and the smell of wild violets and sappy samaras complemented the loamy undertones of the forest. As they passed under a bough of hickory, Violet grasped the branch in her hand.

At the pond, a small clearing in the wood sat right up against the water, complete with a bench to just sit and watch the wind blow the waves over the cresting heads of turtles, frogs, and carp. A small pile of flat stones sat beside the water.

Jim set Violet down on the bench. "Watch this," he said. He selected a smooth, round stone from the pile. He tossed it across the water. It skipped across the water several times, sinking into the water with a splash on the final skip. "I used to do that all the time when I was a kid." He looked at her. "When I was your age." He found another stone. "Here," he said, handing it to her. "You try. Just pull your arm back and toss it like a frisbee."

She hopped off the bench and stepped up to the water. She flung the rock at the water, and it gave a half-hearted skip before sinking below the surface.

Nature's Prestidigitations

"Good job," said Jim. "Much better than the first time I ever tried."

Violet smiled, her gap-toothed grin beaming.

They walked on, Violet holding his hand. Jim scanned the trees and forest floor for a squirrel.

"Look!" she said. She pointed to something white off the path. They walked up to the edge, where Jim lifted Violet up so she could see better.

"What is it?" asked Jim. It was a circle of mushrooms with a bare patch in the middle.

"It's a fairy circle," she said. "It's where the fairies have parties."

He set her down on the path. "I hear," he said, "that the mushrooms form circles because they keep eating all the food in the middle, and have to keep moving out like that."

"That's silly," she said. She took one more look at it before they continued on their journey.

As they walked, a squirrel ran out in front of them carrying a hickory nut in its mouth. Violet squealed when she saw it, scaring the squirrel up a tree. It sat there motionless waiting for them to pass by. She gave it wave before setting off once more.

They came across a large tree. Its rough, gray bark was covered on one side by green moss. Sticking out of the side of the tree, however, was a the bud of a sunflower, its yellow petals beginning to peek out through the green florets.

"Fairies," said Violet, "like to plant seeds in strange places."

"So do chickadees," said Jim. They both admired the phenomenon until Violet's gaze went upward.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to something dangling from the branch of the tree. Jim looked up.

"It looks like a birdhouse," he said. It was made of wood and bark and bits of woven fiber, but definitely looked like a house complete with miniature shutters.

"Maybe it's a fairy house," she said.

Nature's Prestidigitations

Before Jim could suggest an alternative, a red bird landed on the porch of the house. With a flourish, it removed its wings and feathers, changing into a tiny person holding a bird-shaped cloak. It stepped into the house, closing the door behind it.

"Maybe," he said. He kept staring for a while longer until Violet tugged on his hand and they went on, searching for one last squirrel.

On the way back, Violet once more on his shoulders, she asked him, "What was your favorite thing today?"

"I liked that birdhouse," he said. "It was neat. We should build one. We'd just need a way to keep out squirrels. You?"

"I liked when you skipped the rock across the pond ten times!"

"I think it was only nine," he said.

"Nine and a half," she said.

He nodded. "Maybe."