

## Off-trail

Behind your family's home is an untouched wooded lot. It is only about two acres total, but to five-year-old you, it seems much, much bigger. With unlimited permission to explore (and parents who only want you playing outside when it's nice out), you and your older brother have been spending your afternoons among the trees. The woods are full of many fascinating things besides the usual vines, acorns, and song birds. As your brother collects building materials for his fort, located at the cusp of the woods, you fill your pockets with all kinds of treasures. A blue jay feather, several pieces of shiny indian chewing gum, and half of a walnut husk that looks like a pig's nose are your latest finds.

At the beginning of spring, your brother made you a deal; you could pal around with him as he built the fort, but you had to keep him in sight. He was going to go where he wanted, and you had better keep up. Even though you have been in these woods day-in and day-out, it is still a struggle to orient yourself without assistance. The previous week, your brother stumbled upon an abandoned fort on the opposite side of the woods filled with usable materials. The two of you have been trekking there for days to relocate some of the choice items. Weaving everything between numerous oak and tulip trees with thick pachysandra grabbing at your tiny ankles is no simple task. As you watch your brother drag a discarded metal firewood rack through the woods (you had tried helping him at first), you catch something moving from out of the corner of your eye.

You pause and turn. White tailed deer. It's difficult to see how many there are through the layers of bright green foliage. Deer wander into your yard on nearly a daily basis, but you've only seen them from afar. As they amble slowly, you move as quietly as possible toward them to get a better look. Rounding the last few branches in your sight line, you finally decide to stop,

but your last step emits a sharp snap as your small sneaker lands on a felled branch sleeping beneath the leafy carpet. You freeze completely. The deer become statues, and the momma has locked her wide, wary eyes on you. At her side are not one, not two, but three speckled fawns, oversized ears pricked and wobbly legs posed to flee. You are so close that you can see their thick black eyelashes and the leathery details of their noses. The texture of their fur looks fluffier and even more colorful in this shorter distance; what appeared simple brown and white to you from afar is now a scene of auburn, copper, cream, and the baby pink of the fawns' inner ears. After many moments, you notice your pulse thumping in your ears and your breath coming out in silent pants of wonderment. It takes everything you have to not shout to your brother, *"come and see!"*

After what feels like several minutes, momma deer determines you are not a threat and the family moves on, reluctantly at first, but then with purpose. The little ones keep up with the doe; the instinct to follow her is strong, and their willowy limbs work twice as fast to keep her pace. The loud *rat-a-tat-tat* of a woodpecker breaks you out of your trance. You turn around to head back, but freeze once more. It appears that the trail you had blazed is gone.

In the spring when just the barely-cracked buds hung on the branches, you had only to look in any direction to see bits of the surrounding houses. Now, the yellowy beige siding on the back of your family's garage - used in the past as a compass - is nowhere to be seen. The limbs and leaves are so dense that you can't spot any flecks of colored brick or hooded eaves anywhere. You are lost. A whole season spent among these trunks and saplings and now you barely know which way is up. You're suddenly hyper-aware of the sound of the forest around you; chirping chickadees, scurrying chipmunks, and the breeze brushing through the greenery are now nearly deafening. How will you hear your brother's footsteps or even see him when (and if!) he comes back your way? Do you stand in place until you are found, or start walking in

a direction at random? Before you can decide, the faint sound of a woman's voice fractures the noise of nature.

"*AMBER! DINNER!*" your mother yells from straight ahead. An immediate wash of relief sweeps down from your hair to your sneakers and you run as fast as your willowy, wobbly legs can carry you, between the bark, through the underbrush, and back to momma.