

## **Wandering**

She was wandering aimlessly from grown-up to grown-up, a little 3-year-old girl. The adults were seated in the living room of this small country house, having a grown-up conversation, which meant, naturally, that what they were talking about was very interesting to them, but meaningless to the little girl. There were no other children present.

She would stand beside a grown-up, her eyes a little above lap-height, hold on to the chair for a minute and see if the grown-up would notice her and talk about something interesting; but this never happened. Then she would wander to a different grown-up, but the same thing would happen again.

The adults became annoyed by her wandering around in search of attention, or in search of something interesting to do. "Why don't you go outside and play?" one of them said. Instantly they all agreed, the best thing was for her to go outside and play.

The country house that she was visiting was her grandmother's house. Her parents had brought her with them to see her grandma. The house was white, with a black roof. The back steps were a little steep and made of concrete, painted red. A faded red. The small porch outside the back door had a railing. If you walked out the back door and stood on the porch, you would be looking over the railing at the back yard.

The yard was green, and flat, a little rectangle of grass. For a great distance beyond the yard there were fields where crops were grown. The fields were intersected everywhere with irrigation ditches, and the first of those irrigation ditches started immediately at the edge of the little back yard. It was filled with water. She would later learn that the ditches were about four feet deep. The ditches surrounded the yard on three sides. It was as if the little country house was perched on the edge of fields that went on forever.

She went out the back door and carefully down the steps, some grown-ups hovering over her at the door, watching her until she reached the bottom step. Then the door closed, and she was alone.

She felt two things: a sense of aloneness, and a sense of excitement. She was looking at all the new things in front of her that she was free to explore. She was the only person that occupied the whole landscape. There was a barn, a huge building, a distance from her, but no one moved in or out of the barn. No one moved anywhere.

She looked down at her feet, at the blades of grass, very green. At her height, the blades were not very far away, and each one looked distinct. Well, what new thing was there to see at the edge of the lawn? She trundled across the lawn, watching the crops come closer and closer. Suddenly, she found herself at a boundary: the soft grass of the lawn stopped, and the dirt at the top of the irrigation ditch began. The dirt fell away in a curve. The curve was the top of the bank of the ditch, and the bank disappeared into the water. The water was still, cloudy, brown, maybe four or five feet across, from bank to bank.

She had never seen anything like this, up close, before. It was so interesting. She leaned forward, over the edge of the ditch, to get a closer look.

She opened her eyes and saw the sky. She felt peaceful, weightless. She was lying on her back, looking at the sky. It was blue, faintly cloudy. She felt no inclination to move, she was content to float. She became aware that Shep, the farm collie, was barking. He was loud and kept barking and barking, he would not stop. Then she heard more loudness, grown-ups, shouting, screaming even. The back door of the little house slammed.

She felt grown-up hands grabbing hold of her arms, then she was lifted out of the water. She became aware that she was dripping wet all over. Adults were calling to each other in urgent voices, somebody yelled, "She's OK, bring a blanket!" Grown-ups were wrapping her up in a blanket, holding her, though she was not aware of feeling cold. Everyone seemed to be talking to her and to each other, reaching out to touch her.

Suddenly she felt embarrassed. She was being held and wrapped up in a blanket, as if she were a little baby! She didn't want to be treated like a baby! She wanted down. She felt constrained to say so, it might hurt the grown-ups' feelings, everyone seemed to want to hold her. But what she wanted was to be let down so she could run around and feel like a big girl. Not to be treated like a baby! But she had to put up with it, she was quiet but impatient. How long would she have to put up with being held and covered up in a blanket?

It was not until later that she realized that Shep was the hero of the hour.

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