

Emily De Penning
Personal Essay
Professor Ratzlaff

Through a Wardrobe, Into a Rabbit Hole

I recently read—for the first time—*Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland*, and I admit that poor Alice seems to be a bit crazy. She gets advice from a hookah-smoking caterpillar, plays croquet with a live flamingo for a mallet, and when a baby morphs into a pig in her arms, she doesn't find it strange, just releases it into the wild. At one point she is trying to figure out a way to squeeze through an impossibly small door and she says the most absurd thing: "I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if only I knew how to begin." I wanted to tell her that was scientifically impossible, that she was nuts. But she wasn't nuts, Carroll explains, "For you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened, lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things were really impossible."

When I was a kid, the impossible happened all the time. Our neighborhood was an entire kingdom. Robyn, my best friend and companion in every adventure, lived two houses down from me. We liked to spend summer afternoons riding our bikes up and down the cracked sidewalk. Broken corners stuck out at precarious angles on certain cement squares, and our parents complained of disrepair. It wasn't safe for children to bounce on their bikes down an uneven sidewalk. We might have understood, had we been riding bikes on a sidewalk, but for us rough terrain was to be expected. We were journeying through the mountains on horseback. While galloping to the uncharted corners of the earth and back, I mastered the technique of jumping off my horse while it was still in motion, letting it collapse (from exhaustion, probably) in the grass as I ran to

the backyard with determined speed. As a princess defending her kingdom from the evil wizard (who looked an awful lot like Robyn's younger brother Eric), there was always urgent news to tell the king; bad news-- "The wizard has turned Robyn evil with a zombie spell and the only way to save her is with a potion hidden in a cave!" Or good news-- "We found the key that will unlock the secret door that leads to the underground city!" Every day, another mission to be accomplished, death always the result of failure. Luckily, I never failed.

I was, however, captured many times. I know what it's like to be prisoner to a ruthless warlock-- hours as a slave sweeping the secret lair (magically disguised as a garage) and a diet of nothing but twigs and leaves. I probably wouldn't be alive today if Robyn hadn't helped me to escape. We would flee down the steep hill in my backyard where the trees surrounding the creek at the bottom became a thick, mysterious forest. Hiding behind some bushes we'd find refuge and herbs that healed our wounds—bites from the ferocious dogs sent to hunt us down, for example. Of course we could talk to the animals there too. They would tell us secrets of the forest, bring us berries to eat, and encourage us to brave the dangers of the creek, even though it was forbidden. Rising up to the wild's call to bravery, I'd jump from rock to rock, tottering over treacherous water, because as I said in my diary when I was nine, "adventure is my middle name."

But even adventurers have to eat. After hours under the warm glow of the summer sun, Those-Who-Made-The-Creek-Forbidden would call us in for dinner. I'd sit in silence at the table, fervently shoveling in food, my mind still entranced by the other world I longed to get back to. The faster you ate, the more time you had to save the kingdom before the worst happened: the call for bedtime.

Bedtime doesn't exist in the land of make-believe, so transitioning into a world where it does is a process. First there was deep-sea exploring in the bathtub with my yellow scuba goggles. Next, the day's triumphs and disasters were dramatically retold from the kitchen table as mom prepared my bedtime snack. But by the time snack was finished, I was ready. I could sit in bed, and Dad would come in and read to me. The imagination that expended itself all day would now be refueled as Dad filled my head with the adventures of Pippi Longstocking, Bilbo Baggins, and best of all, the Pevensie children in Narnia. I now know that my dad is a terrible reader. His sentences are choppy when he reads out loud and he has trouble pronouncing big words. But I didn't know that about him when I was little because I didn't notice. Lying there in bed, staring up at the ceiling, or propped on my side looking out the window, I didn't hear so much as see Bilbo crawling through the eternally dark tunnels where he meets the sly creature Gollum; or Eustace crying hot, steamy tears because he woke up transformed into a dragon; or trees popping up from the ground as Aslan sings them into being when creating Narnia. I felt sympathy for the brave hobbit when he was stuck floating down a river in a barrel on his birthday, and excitement when Peter and Susan finally felt the mothballs turn to snow under their feet and discovered there really was another world beyond the wardrobe.

One summer we hiked through the Badlands in South Dakota. The name alone sparked creative thoughts, and it appeared as the name promised. Surrounded by untamed prairie, the Badlands stuck out on the plane as a great city, pinnacles of stone stabbing the sky. Sharp ridges and steep canyon walls towered above like an unconquerable fortress. Beaten by wind and water, erosion had left a mind's playground:

layers of sediment formed ribbons of purple, yellow, red, orange, and gray. Twisted and jagged rock took the shapes of animals and faces. We were being watched as we walked the gorges, like travelers lost in a maze of streets in this stone kingdom. But we couldn't just observe, we had to be a part of it. While my mom took pictures from below, my dad, younger brother and I tested how high we could climb up the rocky slopes, bits of sand and stone crumbling to the bottom with each scaling attempt. My dad, guardian of the stories he read to us, cried out, "Look! Do you think Gollum is down there?" My brother (who knew about Gollum too) and I scurried over and joined him, bending over and peering into a dark hole in the rock. A little farther we found (another shock) the dragon's cave. A line of green rocks trailed from the hole so perfectly we could easily believe it was the dragon's tail, so we walked by quietly in whispers, afraid to wake him.

In a forest, at another time, we were back in Narnia, the place dearest to our hearts. Several feet of snow burdened the ground and the trees were bare and still- the curse of the White Witch. It was early evening. The sky, already overcast, was getting darker. Perfect silence, broken by the sudden sounds of twigs snapping or a bird taking flight, put us on edge as we walked the path. Were those the Witch's spies, off to bring her news of our location? We had to rush to the stone table before she caught up with us, so Dad, the fearless leader, led us off the path. We began sliding down a steep hill, clutching onto trees at intervals to slow our speed. I still remember reaching the bottom flushed, heart beating fast, breathing hard, feeling alive. It all seemed so real in the surrounding quiet of the woods.

It was easy then, somehow, to believe in magic. But when you "grow up," much of the magic is lost. We read about Alice, how she followed a rabbit with a pocket watch

down a rabbit hole, and laugh at her strange adventures. I've even heard people attribute her "trippy" experiences to Lewis Carroll being high when he wrote them. No sane man would come up with that stuff. We know what reality is: getting good grades to get into college to graduate with a degree so you can get a job and get health insurance for your family and money to buy a house and a car. Is that really it? Was Carroll on drugs? Or was he right when he said, "We are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bedtime near." Who fret to find that maybe life is bills to pay, the mundane, then death; who secretly long for magic, but don't believe in fairy tales.

C.S. Lewis, the creator of Narnia, thinks "you and I," (he means us grown ups) "have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us." His children's stories, after all, were not intended simply as far-fetched tales to please children. Narnia is an allegory for life as Lewis believed it was meant to be lived, an allegory my childhood fantasies played out. Both Carroll and Lewis were professors, educated men and prominent figures in the adult world. They knew the daily drudge of life. They are not asking us, with their stories, to abandon reason and live in a childish ignorance, lost in dreams. They simply know what it means to be old (and wise) and still have your soul soar—to be moved by a line of poetry, to recognize creativity in the complexity of a forest, to see God's hand in the trees. Under the guise of a children's novel they write to awaken our sleeping imagination with a cry-- creativity, beauty, wonder, and Aslan (though not in the form of a lion), exist! We only need to break the enchantment to see it.