

For adults, who have forgotten...

*We wander darkness by the wood,
'Neath wispy bows that bend and flow,
While gleaming eyes and hungry mouths,
Watch us quietly as we go.*

Now listen closely...

At the bottom of the garden, behind the old oak tree, in darkness and whispers and lost boys' dreams, set deep into the brick wall, is a door. Push your hand through the ivy, fingers questing like spiders' legs, until you find the knocker. It will be rusted with age, so twist it hard.

Hear that groan and rumble? Behind the leafy curtain, bricks chase one another; their mortar dust falls in spinning motes to land on soft grass. Up and up they tumble, out of sight and mind, until finally the way stands clear.

If you turn your head you can see the garden path, back past the old oak tree, all the way to the front door. It's still there. You can turn back any time. Take a breath and trust me. I've walked here once before.

Slide your hand through the ivy. It should offer no resistance now. Up to the elbow you go, dry leaves rasping against cold skin, then your shoulders and head too.

You'll feel yourself falling, faster and faster, down past dirt and clay and dinosaur bones, through cobwebs and shadow, beyond fear and dreams and old wives' tales...into darkness.

This is the Wild Wood. Sit down and rest a while; you'll need to gather your strength. Feel the moss under your hands. Dig fingertips into soft earth.

Did you bring your breadcrumbs? You have to be careful here. Trees crowd in on all sides, silent sentries that patrol the gloom, and only the very brave or very foolish wander forgotten pathways and lost trails without some means of returning the way they came.

It's quiet, isn't it? A heavy stillness. See how the branches and the leaves bunch so close together? Almost blocking out the light? It was made that way, long ago. There aren't many woods

like these left, and the ones that remain have become untamed and vengeful. Stick to the path, and keep the breadcrumbs handy.

Never forget: birds and beasts in the forest are not all to be trusted. If an animal needs tending you should heal it. If it needs feeding you should feed it. But beware, my son, those creatures with knowing eyes and sharpened fangs. Their tongues will sell you hope and joy, even as they salivate at the thought of dinner.

The wolf is chief among their company. No matter how well he is disguised, the size of his ears and teeth always gives him away. And while the Jabberwock does haunt these parts, he is a rare and elusive beast. Much more common are the dreaded Jub Jub birds, whose cries and cackles will echo between the bows, giving no hint of their distance or direction. If one of these crosses your path, a vorpal sword is all that will save you from a gruesome end.

Oh yes, one more thing: do not follow the white rabbit. That way lies only madness.

Trek westward through the wood for thirty days and thirty nights. Don't forget the breadcrumbs. Stick to the path and make little noise; with luck, your journey will pass unnoticed.

When you hear birdsong you'll know you've made it. Bluebirds never sing when danger's close. Turn a corner, past the lamp-post, and sunlight will bathe you golden. Feel the warmth spread along your arms and legs, tingling, like butter melting over toast. Hold up your hands to a new light and watch as beams pass between the fingers. Suddenly, thirty days and nights of darkness seem far away. Their memory drifts out through your ears, like smoke from a genie's lamp.

To the west, there's nothing but green folds and endless fields. That is the direction you must take. But don't worry; the way will be marked clear.

While your feet tread golden bricks, you'll find yourself overcome by the urge to sing. Do not fight it. A tune helps to pass the time.

Eventually, the road will fork.

Look to the right: a dark and treacherous valley. You can't make out details in the gloom, but it suggests an old story....of blood and teeth and wings against the moonlight. Lightning stabs down between stunted trees and briar patches, making the shadows dance like witches round the cauldron. At some point, without fail, a wolf will howl in the distance.

Look to the left: dappled sunlight falls on a bubbling brook. Birds sing in the leafy trees and, in the distance, almost inevitably, there will be a rainbow. If you listen closely you'll hear the sound of harps playing.

This might seem like a trick question, but it isn't. Follow your instincts.

As one day passes into the next, the yellow bricks will begin to give way, swallowed up by lush grass, until the path disappears and you are left all alone. Do not be afraid. This is meant to happen. Walk a while beneath tall trees. Smell scents you never knew before. If you see a house made of gingerbread, do not be tempted to take a bite. You don't know where it's been.

When you meet an egg on a wall, engage him in conversation. But mind what you say. He likes communication to be precise.

Remember: apples here are bad for your health, sometimes straw is worth more than gold, and a pea's size is limited only by your imagination.

Continue westwards, into the setting sun, until you reach the ocean. By this stage your breadcrumbs will be running short, but it doesn't matter. You're nearly there. Salt tingles on the air here, and the waves crash and hiss against white sand, inviting you in for a dip. But do not be tempted. Mermaids guard Poseidon's realm and they are as merciless as anything else that dwells beneath the sea. Riding seahorses as men ride thoroughbreds, their tridents fly swift and true, and one cut from them stings like salt under the skin for a thousand years.

Walk north a while, holding to the beach. Listen as your shoes crunch seashell fragments into even smaller pieces. Watch pirate ships crossing the horizon. If you see a walrus and the carpenter, ignore them. Oysters always were too gullible for their own good.

After all this, after months of travel across endless vistas no bigger than a garden patch, you'll see it: a lonely mountain rising proud into the sky, snow from its peak being whipped away by a winter wind.

Tread softly under the great arch; hear footfalls echo back to you off distant walls as you enter the belly of the mountain, the dragon's den.

Do not be afraid; the great wyrm will be asleep atop his treasure, gold coins pressed tight among glittering scales. Wipe the sweat from your forehead and focus only on the lamp, sitting there

all alone. Slip it gently into your pack, careful not to rub the gleaming metal, then tiptoe back the way you came; silent as the grave that awaits a clumsy thief.

Then run, my son, run as fast as you can, because a dragon who will sleep soundly through any thunder storm will wake all too easily when he senses a piece of his treasure being spirited away by footpad's fingers. Run back the way you came, back over the sand and through the trees and past the wall and along the road, back and back and back, until you are once again by the lamp-post and the dragon's roars have faded, far away now, drowned out by the silence that dwells in the Wild Wood.

Did you follow the breadcrumbs? Look at them now, a tiny chain that stretches all the way through the darkness, unbroken, back to a real world and a warm bed.

But first, the lamp. Pull it gently from your bag. It will be heavier than you expect.

You know what to do now. When the genie appears he will offer you three wishes. Don't worry too much about the first two, you cannot help but waste them. For the third, which is never born from vanity, concentrate hard. This bit's important. Click your heels together three times and think of home. Breathe it in and hold it there. Savour it. Roll it around your tongue like a lozenge.

Then open your eyes.

You're back in the garden, under the old oak tree. Home awaits you up the path. It will seem smaller than you remember. Risk a glance over your shoulder. A cold wind rustles the ivy, whispering hints of the forgotten tales; the ones no-one will ever know.

And now you run, past the old oak and through the front door.

Then it's up the stairs and into bed,

To rest a while,

Or dream instead.