

by Raven ©2011 All Rights Reserved

“When you go out”

This is Jac. I’ve been asked to write this part, and I just want to say right away that if I didn’t have an urgent purpose driving me, I would find it extremely difficult to make myself sit and write. You have to sit down for a long time staring at a blank page, and it seems to me that while I’m alive, I should be moving. It feels odd to clutch this pen between my fingers; it’s a small and unyielding little replacement for my spear. But Raven says this is another way to take action; it’s having a voice, she says- it’s just like that ritual the Lost have, only it’s as though I’m putting my song out there much further, for people I don’t even know. She assures me that this is the way to reach people with what I saw. I figure I owe her. She was so patient (well, most of the time) with my teaching her how to survive in the wilds, that I may as well let her be my teacher now. So bear with me as I stumble my way through this. I promise it will be worth it. Here we go.

I didn’t stay a long time to pack provisions. I wanted to travel lightly and just forage along the way. I’ve been hunting and foraging for myself for so many years, it’s like breathing. As I walk along I keep my eyes peeled for food: that’s what happens when you live in the wild, you’re always looking for food and you’re always looking for signs of danger and for escape routes, options to get up high or away if something bigger than you comes along looking for food. Everybody out there is looking for food, you see- it’s just a matter of who is bigger or who

has sharper teeth or wits. If you watch a wild creature you'll see they're doing the same thing, every moment, all their lives. I guess that's what I've become: a wild thing, a Jackdaw. I like who I've become; sometimes I picture what it would be like if I were to be picked up and plunked right back with my parents again, among my people in their "fashionable set." It makes me laugh like mad just picturing it, me at a dinner party with my eyes darting around to find hidey holes behind the curtains in case I'm cornered by an unwanted predator (and believe me, the predators that wear cravats and dinner jackets are far worse than the predators I find in the woods. At least the wolves are very honest about what they want), or stowing away some dinner in the recesses of my dress for later, because I wouldn't be able to bear seeing all that food go to waste! I can scarcely credit it, when I think back to all the food. Ladies aren't supposed to eat much, and the tables are piled high, dish after dish just like a parade of debutantes. I think it might make me sick to see it now. I didn't have trouble at all, back when I was pretending to be a wild, crazy girl in the woods for those who were watching me: all I had to do was imagine going back home, and the laughs came so hard it made me glad I left off wearing corsets.

Oh blast, I've gone and wandered out of my story. Raven said this might happen but I was just to nudge things right back again.

So, I put a few things in a bag (you really don't need to know what. Essential things; I don't like stories that list every blasted thing) and I set out at dawn, feeling pretty full of myself if I tell you the truth. I like a challenge, and I like setting out on the road with a fresh morning ahead of me. There really is nothing better than starting a journey, knowing I'm going to find something, and not knowing what it is, but feeling like I'll be able to handle anything that comes up.

The one thing you need to know is that I took Cora's spear. My spear, now. I always strap it diagonally across my back with a bit of leather, or if I get tired I even use it as a walking stick, point side up. That way I can flip it right into position if I am attacked: and that's a good thing when you're tired and you've had a long march and maybe not enough food. Just a little tip here: it's good to have your hand around your weapon. Even if your weapon is just a good pair of lungs (most ladies I know are useless except for screaming if there's trouble) have it close to hand when you're tired, because that's when trouble surely comes. Attacking from your weak places, from the side or from the back.

I've gotten so I sort of have feelers in my back and sides- I mean, I don't just pay attention to the things in front of me that I can see. If you try it right now, you can do it too. Just close your eyes (I don't close my eyes when I'm walking, of course, but it will help you) and pretend you're opening up your back, feeling out what's behind you. You'll feel a tingly kind of feeling maybe, and all of a sudden you might also feel very, very exposed back there. It's a scary feeling, and it might even make you want to whip around and look behind you. We are all always that vulnerable on our back and sides - (yes, even at dinner parties, though that's a different kind of danger; I've heard "ladies" talk about a girl the second she turns her back and walks a little bit away! It has always made me want to spit.) we're all that vulnerable, we just shut down our senses usually, so we can forget about that.

Well, I don't forget about it. I know that when I'm walking and I'm getting sleepy with the rhythm, and maybe the wind is making the pine needles shimmy and sound a little like soft rain, and my eyes might be starting to droop, that's exactly when I make sure my hand is hard and strong around my spear. I'm always ready to flip it down in my hand, point toward the attacker.

Only thing is, this time, the attack didn't happen to be anything I could kill with my spear. Yes, the enemy attacked me in my most blind and naked places; the enemy attacked at my weakest spots, but at first, I didn't know it was an enemy. I didn't even know.

It started like this: I'm walking along, and there are a lot of little thoughts tickling the back of my mind. Have you ever tickled for trout? What you do is you find a big rock or something along a river, and you wait. Mr. Fat Trout, when he's worked his way through a bit of rapids, he likes to find a rock or shelter and rest himself. So what you do is you plunge your arm all the way in, turn your hand up, with your fingers trailing up from the bottom like weeds, and you move them a bit, just gently with the current. That movement also helps with the cold---you have to sit there patiently quite awhile, and heck if it isn't cold enough to make your bones crack! When Mr. Fat Trout comes along to rest himself, all you do is gently brush his belly. Not too much - just a little. Maybe don't even touch him at first. It's not really a movement, it's a way of thinking: you've got to sort of blend with the current, imagine that you're grasses and you've been there a long, long time, just waving and breathing. You don't get excited, you don't allow yourself to think of wanting that fat fish, because he'd feel it through your fingers and through his belly, and away he'd dart, as fast as blinking. No, you just think about that current, and then when he's fallen into a sleep, you grab him quick and toss him onto the bank.

Well, that's what these thoughts did to me. Exactly what they did. I'm walking along, and they're tickling softly at my head, like they're saying "Oh, don't pay attention to us, we're just your normal thoughts, chattering away, we're harmless," and before I know it, I'm surrounded; I'm in the middle of a flood, a fully unleashed and completely developed war. They were my fears, tickling at me so quietly I didn't have time to fight them. Thoughts about Cora, about what

I did. Wondering if I was wrong. Wondering if I really was crazy. Thoughts, always- thoughts about that Lost place, and how I had lied to Mari about it. Well I didn't really lie straight out-I just didn't tell her the whole truth, and it was a struggle...because it involved her. I thought it might be dangerous for her to know the truth, but I struggled with it- did I make a mistake not telling her? Concealing things isn't my way, and I felt the knowledge of it twisting around in my belly. These thoughts kept chattering, almost like they were carrying on a conversation with themselves inside my head. Like when you're at one of those endless dinner parties I mentioned earlier, and you let the chatter flow over you, with the light sparking off the crystal, the gleam of people's jewels and clothing. You just go into a sort of dream and let it wash over you. That's what happened: those fear-enemies in my mind distracted me, lulled me into being unaware of the attack. I didn't see it until I sort of woke up, standing in front of the mist wall, the border to the Lost Kingdom, the last place I wanted to be, completely opposite from the direction I thought I was heading. I am still convinced my guilt and fears drew me there.

The mist was moving more than usual, like something was stirring it up. It roiled and churned, coiling around itself and uncoiling, rather like my stomach was doing. The palm holding my spear tingled; I couldn't get a proper grip, it was slippery with sweat. I stared at the shifting wall, mesmerized. I was still caught up in my thoughts, somewhat unsurprised that I should find myself staring at the wall of mist; my thoughts had hovered around it for so long, it felt inevitable that it should appear before my eyes. I had left an old battle here, unfinished. I hadn't won that battle- I had simply run away.

As I stared at the mist, I felt my spear sliding through my palm, heard the muffled thud as it struck the forest floor. I tightened my fingers slightly around the wood in reflex. In retrospect, I am very glad I did; I don't know what would have happened to us all, if I had let the spear fall. I wasn't aware of needing it at the time. I was almost using it to hold myself up; I had forgotten it was a spear. I had forgotten everything except that swirling, dancing wall of mist.

I saw color flashing out of the corner of my eye; every time I tried to look closer and see it, a color would appear again on the opposite side, so swiftly I wasn't sure whether it was just a trick of my brain or whether there truly was something appearing within the mist. There would be a glimmer of blue, and I'd shift my eyes to the side where it had appeared, and look as deeply as I could into the ghostly, dancing wall. Then a flash of green on the other side, and I would turn my head slightly, looking still more deeply. In that way, my head and eyes darting back and forth, I found myself drawn ever deeper into the depths of that puzzling wall. All the times I had been here before, the wall had appeared to me nearly opaque, immovable, like someone had shaped a cloud out of the sky and frozen it into ice. Now, it had a living, marbled depth, taking my breath away with its beauty. The deeper and longer I gazed, the more I would see those small glimmers and flashes of color, as though the veils of mist were coyly dancing aside to show me wonders that lay within. My heart was pounding; not with fear, but with a sort of breathless wonder.

The crossing this time was entirely different. It felt like I simply walked through- although in the midst of that mist, there was no "through". There was no ground, no sky; I was suspended in an awesome moment that may have been brief, and it may have lasted years. I do not know. One moment, I was looking closer, sure I was about to see what the color was, see things more

clearly; holding my breath, I looked for it, waited for the shifting cloudiness to move aside just enough to show me- was it a lake? a clear sky? a forest? The next moment, I had lost all sense of self. It was as though I had been looking so hard, I had *become* the mist. Have you ever looked at a sunset, and it's so beautiful that for a moment you are lost in it, you forget yourself and just merge with it? That's what it was like. Only it wasn't brief- it wasn't the space between one breath and the next; it was a lifetime to me.

What I experienced in that mist is impossible for me to describe. I am told that I must not try to describe it any more, at risk of my own sanity...but I have never been one to abide by the rules or follow other people's instructions. I am going to spend my whole life trying to describe and teach what I saw- and even if I am just able to touch on a fraction of its beauty, I will consider my life well spent.

Quite simply, I saw everything. I felt as though I were suspended- completely at ease, no weight anywhere in my body, completely unaware of my physical being. The only thing I can compare it to is if you've ever had a beautifully restful night's sleep in a feather-bed with a light, warm comforter over you- when you awaken, deliciously sleepy, just floating in a restful bliss. That's what it was. In that state, I saw -not only saw, but lived- everything. Every time, every place; I saw the world through every person's eyes- it was quick as a flash, and it was lifetimes. All times in one, interwoven...only I wasn't so aware as to put these names to the experience. I just was.

I must not try to speak about it further - I will keep writing, as Raven says I must do. I will write and write and write, and maybe one day my words will catch a glimpse of it. But I must

not speak further of it now, as I fear I won't stop. I must let someone else tell the rest now, so you will see what they saw when they found me.