

Follow Me Softly, Into the Earth

A. E. Corder

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The woods are a dangerous place. You have always been told this, though you can't know for sure. Keep away, they say. Simple; straightforward; rooted in your questioning mind since birth. Keep away from the woods.

And you do, though you've never understood why. Obedience isn't the challenge; the woods have long grown foreign and strange. Not the sparse, prickly groves that populate the fields—but the Old Woods, as whispered by the elders and superstitious mothers and excitable teenagers—the woods snaking thick and black, coming so close as to nest at the furthest corner of your backyard—the corner from which you never let your parents catch you playing. The challenge lies in your understanding—in all your curious *whys*. *Why* must you stay away? *Why* are the woods so dangerous? —Questions your parents shrug off with a practiced indifference, revealing only that to disobey is death. Or sometimes, in an exasperated attempt to stave off your wondering: something worse than death.

By night you watch the woods from your bedroom window, resting your chin on the chipped paint of the ledge. Wind blows across the dark expanse, stirring shadows on the grass. You watch the trees in their silent defense, but never so much as a sound comes from the deep. Nor do you catch any movement, though red-gold sparks of flame seem often to dance across the pines. But perhaps it is just the eager wishes of your imagination, the winking of stars in the wind.

Born with a propitiation for the irregular, your own invented explanations have long fed an *overactive imagination*. That's what the adults say, as if it were something quaint, something to outgrow in time. They can't understand your interest, and the only person who did, a girl of your age, abandoned home with her family when her sister was...*taken* by the woods? Claimed? Ran away to? You can't quite keep straight what the people say, the way they tell it.

You come to suspect this is because most don't actually know. It seems those who disappear never return to pass on their tales of secrecy and woe. This fails to stem your questioning. *Someone* must know. In the past this meant riding into town with your brother to swing your legs from a stool at the diner and pose your thoughts to a barrage of townspeople weaving between cups of earth-smelling coffee and thick, greasy burgers. Very few were ever amused; fewer still entertained you with a response. But where the older townsfolk held to their superstitions, your brother's friends were only too happy to oblige your youthful appetite. By the beams of flashlights or the flickering of bonfires, they wove tales of terror, thinking they'd frightening your hungering mind.

"The woods grow so close and thick, it steals your very breath," they'd say.

"The branches wrap around your arms and pull you down into the ground."

"The wind takes your voice—then screams and screams, so everyone can hear you, but no one can do a thing about it—till you go mad from the sound."

Snickers and jeers inevitably followed, and though you had little cause to believe them, such whispered ribbons of the dark still captured your imagination. Over the course of the years, these breaths of unanswered riddles stoked the embers of your secret dreams.

Now you are old enough to roam town alone and pour over books that might serve better where your friends and neighbors have not. But even from the bowels of the library your search proves fruitless, citing only incidents where members of the community have disappeared. There are no details beyond, though you notice the names of such people, even those more recently taken, are never mentioned publicly.

Are the adults truly unaware of what lies in the Old Woods—and afraid to admit it? Or is there some special age when all is revealed about the goings-on of the forest? You don't trust your parents to give you any more of an answer—and don't wish to concern them with your continued curiosity.

"After all this time?" they'd exasperate. "When will you let it rest?"

These childish fantasies, they used to sigh. You're aging out of childhood now, have been for a while—and don't wish to provide them a reason to watch you extra closely. The townspeople are barren of news, shrugging you off as "curious thing, that one." Your brother's friends grew old—as did their campfire tales. And there's no town crier—no ancient, revered woman who can tell you all you wish to know, "*for a price, of course*," though you've searched for such a source. Even the kindly

librarian sighs and tells you perhaps it's time to find a different hobby—even as she suggests a new section of the archives to try, though they yield nothing new.

When the clouds crawl slow and heavy late one afternoon, your desperate curiosity seeks answers from your brother. His truck rumbles along an uneven road caught between gravel and cracking asphalt, the throaty motor and bouncing tires forming a ragged but familiar rhythm. Gusting through open windows, the smell of corn hangs thick in the wind, and the sky slings so wide that you think if the world were to turn upside down, you'd fall and fall through the gray forever.

You've never spoken to your brother of the woods before. He is solemn, quiet, hardworking, where you are inquisitive, a drifter, always giving your thoughts a voice—through some medium or other. You're sure he knows of your fascinations; he is too observant not to, especially after all the questions you've posed to his friends. But when jostling down one of a hundred beat-up farm roads, you ask, "Why won't anyone tell me what happens in the Old Woods?" his brows furrow beneath the brim of his cap and his mouth tugs down at the corners. He gives you an honest answer; it isn't what you'd hoped for.

"I don't know."

"You don't know *anything*?"

"I know it's dangerous. I know bad things happen to the people who go in there."

"What kinds of things?"

“I don’t know, they—they change, okay? I know it’s confusing...and hard to understand. But that place...it isn’t safe. We’ve been told to stay away for a reason, and there’s enough proof out there for me to take it seriously.”

“Proof,” you repeat. “Just people missing.”

“Yeah,” your brother says. “And none of them came back, did they?”

He turns a dial, which only increases the dry crackle of the radio to a slightly louder buzz. You nestle into the cracked leather seat with a sigh. Studying the single, blurred-together mesh of crops outside the window, you almost wish you could forget about the Old Woods altogether—lead a simple, unquestioning life like all the rest.

Almost.

Without satisfying conviction from the knowledgeable figures in your life, you are left to the whims of your own imagination, which until now posed only a substitution for the truth. But now—now they very well could *be* the truth. How do you know the horrors that leap from your charcoals and pens aren’t the very spirits haunting the woods outside your door? How do you know the wind that blows through your open window in the moments of your falling asleep isn’t the breath of some whispering giant or the tempting spells of some coven of witches? You catch yourself stopping to linger at the edge of the woods—where the spindle trees meet the dark firs, lost in a daydream of what-ifs, hoping to catch a glance of some dark power that moves within. You worry your parents will catch you staring, will grow

alarmed at the creatures which slither across your gallery of drawings, but they don't seem to notice, their eyes passing over any symbols of disturbance, filling it with something else. Some blank space, perhaps. You *are* prone to daydreams. You *are* prone to the creation of strange and fantastical creatures. Why should that mean anything?

One night you toss in such a fevered state that the wind, gusting through your window and stirring the sea of pages on the floor, draws you up from your pillow like the force of a ghost never seen, only felt. Surging awake, you catch blue shadows on the ceiling, slithering in sleep demons or a host of dancing fairies. You rise from your bed and pad to the window, feet stirring paper and catching smudges of ash gray and ink. The night is still and cool like any other. But *there*. Just for an instant—some tiny ball of golden light drifts within the edge of the woods. It's gone now; nothing. You scratch the sleep from your eyes, study the trees for minutes. No, nothing—the spark likely just a fragment of some lingering dream...

But what could be the harm in checking? Just to be sure.

You steal down the stairs, keeping your weight on the balls of your feet, careful to skip the steps that squeak. The metal doorknob is ice beneath your fingers, but you slip out without stirring a shadow. The wind stirs at you with petulance; but the grass is soft, and the trees wave invitingly. You tread the familiar dips and knolls, stopping a few yards from the edge of the woods—that known but never-crossed line of earth and darkness. Gazing into its thick cloak of mystery, you strain for any tell-tale sign of life within. Though you wait, though you

dread—nothing comes. Nothing answers. Your only companion is the wind, which seems to laugh at you, chiding your eagerness with tender brushings that urge you back to bed. Your body remembers its weariness when you curl into your covers, light and shadows mingling unremarkable on the ceiling, by morning nothing but a peculiar half-dream.

In the end, the woods answer when you do not expect. The evening is seemingly ordinary, your brother's rhythmic work sounding from the tool shed—your mother stirring securely in the kitchen. The sky sinks from a mask of gold and rose into the blue smoke of dusk. Having wandered the distant fields, teetering over the long arms of fallen branches, you amble into the familiar ashen groves of home. A line of fiery dusk catches a fragment of color. Thoughts dismembering, you kneel to examine it further. The color shifts; it is a feather—downy, deep velvet, tinged with red. You study its pattern, reach to pluck it from the earth, when a soft rustle draws your attention up—into the shadows of the wood.

And there *it* is.

A pair of golden bronze eyes gleams between the branches, set in the wide, pensive face of something that might be human...but doesn't quite feel human. Perhaps it's the feline slant of the nose, the tawny mane of hair, the furred edges of the skin. Are those the rustlings of wings—or the flicking of a tail? Though hard to identify the creature's shape between the shadows, you are frozen in its gaze. This being that holds your attention, that stills your movements—down to the rhythm of your chest—blinks once. The blink says many things, all of which you understand.

It is a riddle, a request, a tempting, outstretched hand. The creature folds into the shadows. You take a breath.

A door opens in the dark. A patch of green twists between the firs. It glistens in gold, in the promise of mysteries answered. But more than this—it bristles with the wind of a life never lived. A realization surfaces. Your life has led to this moment, has collided with this sudden, irreversible choice. Maybe you always knew it would—and what would happen when it did—because your resolve never falters.

The world tilts. Earth thrown back, the sun slides down; deep green rises to meet you. You imagine you hear your mother's disbelieving scream sear across the earth. You imagine your brother's look of horror as he sprints across the yard. But you don't glance back. The world rights itself with another violent turn, and you fall into the wood.

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Time exists differently here. It is a languid creature, weaving between trees with a drunken, dancing delight. Any idea of the Old Woods is forgotten, discarded like a broken toy in the shell of an abandoned home. Now there is only earth. It unfurls beneath your touch, flowers opening where you walk, ivy twisting where you trail your fingertips. Life and beauty respond as living things. All is new; nothing is what was.

How could *this* be what they warned of? You laugh in spite of yourself. Perhaps they have feared only shadows—what feeble monsters their nightmares

could piece together. It's no wonder to you now—the lack of written records. How could anyone describe what you have found?

Treetops echo songs like wind chimes, melodies cascading in raindrops. The sunlight too is a conscious thing, twirling about on the forest floor, a welcoming, intangible array of splendor. Color explodes across your tongue, in your nose, filling your lungs. Life blooms deep in your veins, twisting to your toes. Your heartbeat begins to match the rhythm of the earth. Your head falls back, and your arms stretch out, embracing the air, the woods.

Give me all you are. I'll give you all I was.

And the wind is soft on your skin. And the grass is soft at your feet. And the clouds which swan like silk travel softly on their journeys. The water in the stream never dripped so clear, sparkling white stars in the sun. You think you could stretch here in the grass, like this. Could intertwine one hand in the flower stems, let the other rest gently in the current of the stream, like this. Could lean your head back so the sun strokes your face and your neck, like this. You could close your eyes to this wonder world of light—and sleep forever beneath the green.

Like this.

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You wake to shadows on your face, thrown by trees which seem to have sprouted in your sleep. As the world sharpens, you find the trees are in fact living

things, gazing at you with tender curiosity. Startled enough to spring from their circle, all fear melts into something *other*, once you see them clearly.

Standing in pools of sunlight, the beings tilt their heads, as though *you* were the curious one. They, who have moss growing in patches along their skin. They who have ivy locks of hair, little mushrooms sprouting on their shoulders. Some carry more protuberant features: dragonfly wings, ivory antlers, flower blossoms where their eyes should be. Others bear only tufts of grass along their legs—or skin that, when it catches the light, glistens like dewdrops in spiders' webs. Each one gazes at you with a pair of rich, golden bright eyes. They are all part of the earth; they're all beautiful. You feel a sudden ache. You want to be beautiful too.

Delight and apprehension bubble in your chest when the creature nearest you—a girl with twigs in her hair and tiny violets blooming across her face—offers you a leafy hand of spindly digits. You accept. They smile in unison.

These children of the earth place a crown of firethorn branches on your head, drape a cloak of the softest moss on your shoulders, then striking up their curious instruments—variations of flutes and strings—the little procession stomps through the great green wood. Over ridges and knolls, across steppingstone brooks and under wide, cavernous roots, your merry parade slinks to a clearing blanketed by lichen and moss. A banquet has been spread there—the silken tablecloth draped over a table whose legs twine into the earth. Golden lanterns, glowing much like the creatures' shining eyes, sway from ancient trees whose branches arc in the tangled canopy of a god's steeples hands.

They seat you at the table's head, in a mighty chair of earthen braids and wooden horns. You smile, basking in the glow of the lanterns, breathing in the heady wind. The host resounds in a storm of merriment—tossing back flutes of star-filled liquid, banging the table with their fists, squealing, squawking, singing.

Once the meat is torn from its bones, the fruit reduced to seed and pulp, the commotion spills out of the chairs—onto the tabletop and into the lantern-lit grove. The stars now dancing in your head, you spin with outstretched arms between the night's musical airs. The creatures beside you blur—an unbroken circle of warmth and pearl white smiles. You kick dishes off the table, dance a deep drum-beating jig. You form another parade, albeit a fluid, drunken one, and stomp across the soft, soft earth. The river of revelry ends in limbs, skin, and teeth, tangled in roots and giggles at the feet of the ancient oak.

You are aware of little but the bubbling of laughter in your chest and the singing of stars in your veins. Warmth and abandon sway in the wind. The tickling of ivy, the kisses of flower petals... Your neck arches back; you welcome them in. The creatures undo your cloak, run their hands up your legs, your throat. Their fingers patter separately, but together meld one beast of bliss. It takes you in its arms, in its mouth, in its hands, sliding like a brook over damp sand, like patches of sunlight between the shadows. For every stroke of the flesh, every kiss on your neck, you feel something like the shifting of dirt, like fistfuls of earth sprinkled over your body. The descent closes in, then. Swiftly. You succumb to the sinking, senses fading in a darkness stronger than sleep.

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Feeling returns first to your fingers. They clench and unclench. Warm and gammy in your hands, fistfuls of earth fill the space beneath your fingernails. If you *had* fingernails. Something is different. Everything is different. And yet, nothing too. You cannot summon to memory anything that preceded this state of being. How can you know this is different? Hands clench and unclench. Your fingers feel rooted. You move to raise them, but instead of air, your arms find earth. Straining with what strength returns, you pull the digits loose. Something crackles and tears, like roots ripped out of dirt. Pain forks through your limbs, fire stabbing at your fingers. But they're free now, and you scrape against the earth until it shifts, tumbles loose. Clenching the surface of your tomb, you wriggle, writhe, gnash your way out—to air, to sky. Grasping at the ground like a wingless worm, your hands reach for anything firm. You try to gasp, but your stomach convulses—expunging clumps of bile that ooze a beetle black. Air finally winds its way in, but your waist folds as your limbs seize with an invisible force. It is several moments before you can stand, using the great trunk of the tree for balance. Only then do you notice your skin. Veins pulse black beneath your arms, tracing dark patterns across the landscape of your body. Like buried roots they crawl, almost identical to the roots on which you stand, twisting down into the earth...

You stumble forward, thoughts racing like the darkness in your blood. *What have I done? What have I become?* Night veils the sky in a dim haze of cloudless gray. You hold your hands to the light; they snap like branches in a storm, melting

black at the tips. A scream makes to leave your throat, but the wind moans instead, and a long, grating wail escapes from the depths of the woods. The trees respond in turn—thrashing against their stationed posts. From their sheaths rip limbs of bark—arms, legs, horned heads seize forth—to snap upon your trembling form.

Bare feet striking the ground, you run. A gale of outrage follows; a hundred howls echo. The trees extend like mirrored corridors, sprouting limbs in branches and teeth in thorns. The hungry earth brings its shivering, convulsing mouth around your shoulders, attempting a swallow—if it doesn't eat you from the inside first. It is only when a root catches your ankle, pitching you down into the moss, that the thought of *home* even enters your mind.

The trees part, the earth folds, and you kneel in grass, crawling at the edge of your house. The night soothes blue with stars, and in silent relief you stagger through the door, forgetting all thought of the woods as you stumble up to bed and drop to sleep.

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Something is in your room. Something is in your room and *you* brought it there. *You* let it in. Ripping back the sheets, you all but fall out of bed, grasping for the switch of the lamp, which thrown, casts a halo of gold revealing— Nothing. The bedroom is empty; the window is drawn. Silence hangs like the weight of a dull stone. Having dispelled your fear as mere illusion, you fall breathless, back to sleep.

§

The morning brings its own unsettling truths. Nothing about your appearance suggests anything inhuman, though your eyelids ring a bit gray, and your eyes themselves shine darker and wider than before. It's the truth, you think. And now that you've tasted it, the truth will be tasting you back, whether it manifests in bodily changes or secrets, flickering behind the eyes.

You anticipate your family's need for an explanation, for your prolonged absence at the least. But in a feat of disturbing transformation, they show no apparent interest. Though your father pats you on the back as he rises with the paper and your mother sets a plate of food at your place—neither utter a word. You think you have somehow been saved, blessed with an unrealized oblivion, but as the days unwind, you begin to fade in your existence, like a flower left too long on the windowsill, forgotten in a state of perpetual wilt.

No one speaks to your disappearance, nor presumes that anything has changed. It challenges your reality, suggests something illusory about the nature of your encounter. Your home, sitting blue in its shadows, threatens death-stricken quiet, and you move through its barren, once blushing halls with no more substance than the wisp of a specter's cloak.

To satiate this voiceless void, your memories flicker with visions of life in the earth—of its beauty and violently intoxicating creatures. It pulls you; absently, consistently, subconsciously. It speaks to you now, where the others do not, but let life flow on in a current of unfailing routine and selective, ignorant bliss. And so, you think, if it must be bliss that kills you, it might as well taste delicious.

§

For the children of the earth, they love you so. Why else would they shower you in sunbeams? Why else bathe you in oceans of heather? Why else infuse your soul with the earth's brightest colors, its softest wonders? In the sway of such company, in the hold of such tenderness, mysteries melt in truth, both terrible and trivial. What more is there than this? What proves lacking when grinding through the earth—one root of a larger, all-connecting source? One flower in a garden of blossoms, bending by the same wind, sprouting with the same pulse. Such petals they have; such lovely, arching thorns. Even with prickings of pain, sweet release is sure to follow—an overflow of self that soaks into the earth and begins anew the circle.

To sleep in the grass is to wake with flowers trumpeting on your skin. To dig your hands into the soft, warm earth is to feel it breathe between your fingers—exploring labyrinths of mangled limbs, oak or skin, with the creatures of the wood. In the herald of the sun they emerge—from the meadows, from the riverbeds, stepping out of mossy trunks and spiders' webs; then by night to fold themselves beneath the dark blankets of the earth, breathing as one. You belong with them now, tortured by beauty and hunger both.

By the graying shades of night, you crawl with uprooted legs from your foamy, oaken bed—down to pools cascading from marble cliffs in silver-hewn sprays. Their waters melt the moss from your skin, the ivy or webbing from your limbs, though by morning it returns, sprouting from your muscles and tendons,

blossoming in your blood. Alone with the earth or tangled in mothwing and violet-kissing reveries, it matters not where you fall asleep. You wake always turning up beneath the soil, the dew to fill your lungs and trickle through your senses, writhing between the flower stems which sprout from your appendages. But for a few dim hours, you admire the reflection of your smooth, unmarked skin. Such a canvas of possibility. Perhaps tomorrow a flowering field.

§

Following the cycle of several moons, a sudden memory floats to the brim of your sinuous haze. In answer, the trees sweep back like the nimble fingers of a hovering and silent magician. Come— See.

You step from the woods to a soft, strangely unremarkable stretch of grass, shining pale in moonlight. Your...*home*...rises at black angles against the sky. All the windows are dark, but the door swings open. Pausing at the entrance, your eyes pierce the gloom. It seems memory has escaped the once-intimate rooms, but time has not. Threads of dust lace every corner, pieces of furniture decomposing in wooden heaps or draped with yellowing sheets like a mourner's veil. Though the floors creak beneath your footsteps and the doors on their rusting hinges, the house has never held its breath to such a length before. You soon realize it isn't breathing at all. Nothing lives here anymore. Time left it a corpse-blue shell, possessing only the faintest of ghosts, only the memory of memories.

The truth resounds with a hollow numbness in your chest. Your feet scuffle to a sofa in the dark, frayed and smelling of must. Paintings left at crooked angles splinter in their frames, colors dripping down the walls. Weeds lash through the rotting boards. You stretch upon the couch and press your skin deep into its cushions. A breath of mounting sorrow and deepest relief exudes from your lungs.

You can never go home. You can never go home.

§

You had almost thought to burn the house down, watch it plume and wither in the fierce, beautiful brevity of a fire flower. Even so, its skeleton would remain, and something about the thought of those wooden bones, slanting disjointed against the twilight, draws you back to the maw of the forest—which ingests you without so much as a pause for a backward glance.

You sprout antlers in the winter, crouching with lithe steps over snow-dusted streams. By spring's gloaming you lie in fields of crimson petals, the night wind dancing on your skin. As summer thrusts up beneath the earth to wrap the woods in green, you stretch beneath the sun, flowers spilling down your neck, up your toes, and thick, bushy moss begins to coat the skin of your arms. You bathe yourself in sunlight, let its blinding warmth absorb and absolve everything that ever was.

§

Your mind spins in the motion of cycles, in resurrections and burials. Tendons of beauty tunnel through your dreams, like roots sprouting mad beneath

the earth. You attempt to coax them up into day—to dance across the fields, leaving wonder in your wake. But the earth is not easily conquered, the ground not so easily tilled, and though you draw your own visions from the soft, soft darkness—it is not a simple thing, reshaping the world that has reshaped yourself.

For the children of the earth, they vex you so. Why must they prance about in meadows? Why guzzle back the soul in rich, riotous revels? Why haunt you now as they did so long ago—with their glittering eyes and light-catching horns, their careless, unaffected demeanor—as if this existence had been claimed without a cost? In the stagger of such a horde, in the grip of such fickle nature, wonder is devoured in want, both terrible and trivial. There must be more than this. What will satisfy this gnawing of the earth—leaving behind only the bitter taste of soil? Its flowering blossoms wither just as quickly as they come. So fleeting they are; so soft and insubstantial—snapped from their beds to dissolve without consequence, without connection. Even in moments of rapture, the emptiness is sure to follow—a relinquishing of self for the earth to swallow and begin anew the circle...

§

Ivy parts between your fingers like the folds of an emerald curtain. You rest an arm against the grainy, moss-patterned trunk of the tree and lean across the invisible border of the wood—a border lost to memory. Beyond looms a structure, propped brightly in the grass, cutting through the sky with the slant of its roof. Song drifts through the open windows, curtains fluttering lazily. Laughter echoes

from somewhere further, unseen. It bubbles in mirth and belonging. Your eyes take in the sight hungrily, wonderingly.

A cloud sails over the sun, drawing waves of shadow down the grass. It furls back again, and the sunlight shifts, catching on the color of someone's hair. And there *it* is—rising to your left, just across the border. A pair of rich, black eyes gleams from the face of a creature—earnest, curious, skin without flowers or wings. It stands about your height, meeting your startled gaze with a challenge of quiet, unwavering strength. Will you step forth to meet it, or will you turn away?

Though the scene before you ripples with an unplaceable air, here stands someone new. Here waits a beautiful creature, one who might even come to love you, given time. A wariness pricks your heart then, despite its swelling ache. A remembrance of time suggests perspective—a question of creation and destruction; fulfillment or corruption? Your soul twists in riddles, too many to untangle when this secret of a soul lies just beyond your reach. You would ask of its desire, but how can you say so much, when you are what you are, and it clearly something *other*? Words fail. You can only blink.

The flash of your golden bronze eyes says many things, all of which the creature seems to understand. The shadows lengthen; you take a breath. A door opens in the dark, and the beautiful one takes a step—bridging the threshold of illusion and truth—to follow you softly, into the earth.