

Kit Carlson
In the Otherside

I have always wanted to fall into an enchanted country. To slip through a wardrobe into Narnia or tumble down a rabbit hole, to make an unexpected shift from this world into another world. To find enchantment, to become ensorcelled.

Long ago I abandoned the idea that this would ever actually happen. But there is a way of moving along a lonely path up a cliffside or standing under a grove of trees that feels magical and sacred, that opens for just the slightest moment a vision of something more substantial underneath.

One day, I was in the middle of Ohio, wanting to hike, looking for a trail I had never walked before. I found a nature preserve off the highway, down a side road, and I followed the one trail that led from the parking lot. After wandering through prairie grass, then climbing a hill through maples and oaks, I came upon a pine forest at the top of a bluff. The trees were pillars rising out of a wide, flat plain covered with copper needles. Slanting morning sun flashed through the branches as the wind stirred the tops of the trees. Light and shadows sparkled and tossed themselves around the grove. The only sounds were breeze and birdsong.

I walked down a broad corridor of pine trees and there, just off to the right, was a circular clearing. The trees bordering the clearing extended bony arms, just skeletons of branches, almost two thirds of the way up, where finally green needles exploded into the sky, greedily reaching toward the sun. In the center of the clearing there was a low indentation, a basin of dry needles. Probably, it was once a campfire pit. Now, it was the navel of the clearing, the deep center point of the grove.

There is a power in a center point. The center of the labyrinth is the place where two worlds meet. The Hopi people's *sipapu* is the gateway where their human ancestors first entered the world. There is even an old saying about God, 'a being whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.' The center is the place of power, of transition, of passage.

I decided to make this center a portal, even if only a portal into a place of contemplation and meditation. I would pass through it to the otherside, whatever the other side might be. I might be simply making a gesture, a liturgy, a ceremony, to mark this time and this place as sacred. I did not expect to be enchanted, simply focused.

I circled the center three times counter-clockwise, imagining the portal opening, opening. I paused on the west side before stepping into the indentation. Then I faced south, west, north, east, honoring the cardinal directions, then emerged into the east, the direction of enlightenment and contemplation.

Nothing of note happened. But I felt at peace. I spread out a big scarf on the ground at the base of a tree and settled in to reflect and pray and enjoy looking up, up where green needles laced patterns against the sky, and where the sun touched diamond flashes along those needles' length.

Suddenly, I saw a young man standing among the trees--tall and lean,

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with long tanned legs and a nest of wild brown hair. He strung a rainbow-striped hammock between two big pine trees, then he stepped away a few feet, turned his back to me, and I heard the sound of liquid hitting the underbrush. As though I was not even there.

And now I wondered, *was* I invisible? Had I actually passed through a portal into some mysterious otherside, where I was no longer part of the reality that everyone else mindlessly danced through? I could hear cars far below on the road, a tractor in the distance, and then a bell tolling the hour. I could still observe the world as I knew it. But maybe, perhaps, the world could not observe me.

This is what it must be like to be a chickadee or a squirrel, watching from a distance as a person enters their world. This is what it must be like to be an elf or a tree nymph observing an amusing human being, without that person ever knowing. I imagined the young man was a fairy tale prince, resting from his quest to slay a dragon. I could be an enchanted being who needed him to free me from a dreadful spell--except I would turn out to be the aged witch, and not a beautiful maiden.

He stretched the hammock and fussed with it until, satisfied, he climbed in, needles showering down from his bare feet. And all was at peace, and the shadows moved and shifted across the clearing. And the wind blew. And in the distance, a robin worked out a wandering tune.

My journey had taken me to this place, a place where I was fully and completely myself and yet, where I seemingly was not even there. At all. I was in a place where trees thrum their song beneath the soil, where birds tell the whole forest who is there, who is not there. Was I there? Was I not there? I knew I was there. I was in my own otherside, the other side of the portal, and the forest moved around me and it sang.

There was time enough in the otherside, time enough to sit in this sacred circle, in a lacuna, a space, the pause between the words, the pause between the worlds.

And time enough, at last, to leave, to pass through the portal again, to circle it three times, clockwise, to close it. Time enough to fold up the scarf, close up the water bottle, zip up the backpack. Time enough to step softly across the bed of pine needles, down the path, back to the hillside, the prairie, the parking lot.

As I left, the hammock and the young man inside it hung motionless among the trees. The spell was broken. It was time to go.