

I am a man, a traveler. My mystic companion is Marrigold, a horse. We are travelers of Life, seekers of Truth, and Beggars of Pottage and Oats.

The usual evening serenade of crickets and nesting birds hushed as hoofbeats thundered through the forest mist.

I walked up a rise in the path where a beautiful black mare romped, pawing the ground. Her mane flowed and foamed wildly as she tossed her head. A gentle nicker drew me near.

I suppressed a smile and plodded along, my journey almost at an end. I wasn't particularly tired, but ready to get off the road for some rest and refreshment. A good bath was in store; I itched in places it wasn't manly to scratch. My road-hard feet screamed for rest and my pack needed to be emptied of its importance. But, all in a day's time.

Marrigold shook her head and chased back to me. Hoofbeats thudded in my heart, deep and close, but she never touched the ground. I never questioned it since the day she nosed herself into my life.

She appeared invisible to some. I was never quite sure if she controlled who could see her and who couldn't. I sometimes felt it was the nature of the person she chose to appear to — the purity of a child's heart or the veil of fear or evil in another.

She played tricks on the ones who couldn't see her: she'd steal a hat, give a behind a nudge, or chomp an apple from a display right in front of the shopkeeper. The owner didn't know whether to scream or shoo away what he couldn't see. Or both.

Children always saw her and wanted to pet her and scratch her ears, which she willingly obliged, to the chagrin of parents who, of course, couldn't see who the child was talking to or

understand what they were doing. She'd snatch a flower from a woman's basket and the woman would faint dead away upon seeing it float through the air.

Yes, sometimes naughty.

She'd scamper and kick up her heels, toss her head from side to side, and offer a deep, horsey chuckle. Delighted children chased at her side, until a father loudly called the child's name, accentuated by pounding a staff onto the ground.

The child usually froze and let Marrigold frolic ahead. Then they stumbled back to the lifetime drudgery of being obedient. Back they went to the shop, picked up a broom and resumed their mundane task of sweeping, or stocking the shelves, keeping one eye on the father and one on the horse as it romped down the street. Spying the horse stealing an apple from a table produced a childlike giggle and a stern look or verbal admonishment from father.

*I can see her. I don't know why. I shake my head.*

We have traveled together through many countries, experienced every hardship and weather. When I pack up to leave on another journey, Marrigold is right beside me—always guiding me, keeping a keen eye out for any beasts and creatures along the way.

Her patience, though, always wears thin as we trudge closer to our final destination. She gallops on ahead, then back to me, thudding along. I hold my breath as she gallops closer at full tilt, but I stand firm. She skids to a stop right in front of me, her nose to my nose, dust swirling around us. Then she bows down, as if in apology, and licks my boots. Her eyes are always alight with mischief and play. She runs ahead, then trots back to me—pushes me from behind. Gives an encouraging nicker as she kicks up her back feet.

I adjust my pack while she shakes and sneezes, her sides moving in and out as she catches her breath.

As per my calculations, today was the day we'd reach our appointed destination—The Slough.

After these last miles, I'll complete my mission and reward myself with a soak in a hot bath and a delicious meal of roasted meat and, if available, potatoes added to brown in the meat juices. Ahh, I smell it.

A low nicker from Marrigold knocked me out of my dream world. She stood erect, her ever dancing hooves at rest. She appeared like a statue until she tossed her head in the direction we were going, eyes alert and fierce.

I quickly took cover behind a skinny tree.

Marrigold growled and shook her head.

I took my stance at her flank as she turned into me, curving around my body. My hand found its way to cover my pack, slung at my side. My ears tuned to any sound, both natural and magical, just as Marrigold's ears flicked forward. I never knew whether it might be a Real Person or something from the Invisible.

I sucked in a breath. Smelled dead.

Ahh. A child broke through the mist and by the twinkle in her eyes, I knew she saw Marrigold. She ... uh, he, I couldn't tell, wore what looked like rags. Filthy, muddy, like she had just finished a mud ball scuffle and lost. Hair knotted and matted, little face and skin dotted with welts.

Marrigold didn't flinch, she barely breathed.

What was a child doing out here alone on a well-traveled road?

Grinding noises filtered by the fog. Ping. Pop.

Soon, another child appeared out of the mist. A boy played a flute I couldn't hear. His fingers twiddled over the flute holes and his cheeks bulged. I knew he was playing, but no sound drifted to my hearing. A bulging pack slung over his shoulder.

Marrigold's ears remained stiff, tense.

A bigger boy followed, dragging the tongue of a wooden wagon. He had some heft to him to be able to pull that.

I stepped back when the wagon load came into sight.

Marrigold curved into me as if glued to me.

Several small children bumped along in the wagon. Eyes straight ahead, no spark of child-like gaiety or mischief. Dirty clothes and what appeared to be mud on their skin and hair. Smelly lot. Fetid. Reeking, like when a small animal gets trapped inside the wall and dies there. That smell.

I staggered back again, pinched my nose closed.

They didn't appear to see Marrigold — just marched onward to the tune of the silent flute.

I waited to see what followed as they passed us by. One tiny child, almost as an afterthought, followed, dragging a filthy doll.

I watched until the fog enveloped them again.

Still, Marrigold didn't move but held her ground. She still faced the mist.

Then I heard it. Grinding. Grating. Metal? Wood?

Marrigold tensed, rigid. Her flank expanded as she held her breath.

I held mine.

The mist grew darker, thicker.

I strained to see.

Finally, a rag-tag line of skinny soldiers. Skinny.

I jumped as they came into view.

Soldiers with children's heads atop skinny metal poles for arms, torso, legs. Emotionless eyes straight ahead. Each carried sticks for weapons, like men would carry a gun—over their shoulders.

None turned a head toward us.

They marched with precision, perfectly in time with each other, or in time with the flute melody I couldn't hear. With each step, the metal of their legs and arms squeaked and groaned.

My skin crawled. The once musty, humid air chilled me under my woolen duds. A damp cold surrounded me, trying to gain entrance to my travel weary body.

We watched as the drippy mist swirling about them soon swallowed them. My last visual was of one metal leg and leather boot as the fog closed in on it.

Marrigold and I waited. We looked both ways, met eyes and raised eyebrows at each other. We looked again, she one way, me the other and back again. Nothing stuck out of the fog. We listened. Nothing.

Just as I took a step, a dirty little pig ran past, dragging a clothesline of entangled shirts and underwear, all hopelessly wrapped around him. A collar of sorts.

Marrigold and I must have seen at the same time that the pig was missing an ear. The other flopped over one eye. Just as the clothesline strung along in front of us, the intense pig odor hung in the thick air along the path.

For some reason, its eyes flickered from us to the road. Then to where the fog had closed behind the soldier band. None of the others before it had even acknowledged our presence. But for this dirty little pig.

The fog grew thicker now, as the pig disappeared into its darkening gloom.

Together, Marrigold and I stepped onto the road, checking behind. We walked backward, then forward.

Just as we could go no farther without bumping into each other, I tied a vine onto Marrigold's front leg and held onto the end, so as not to lose each other.

The chill settled deeper into my bones. Fog swirled denser until we literally bumped into a wooden trough. Empty.

Marrigold, although invisible to most, drank deeply when water came available. But not today. Not this time.

We edged farther on. Ruts morphed into deeper ruts in the road. Odd tracks. I leaned down to inspect them and they were dry to the touch, forming little mountain ridges along the road.

What looked like tiny houses lined up in the valley. I rubbed my eyes. Time to get off the road and nourish my body. Too long on the road makes for eyes playing tricks.

I stood and backed away, bumping into Marrigold's rear. She had turned around and was facing the other direction. I reached into the deepening fog, trying to find the trough, but my fingers touched something soft and ... fleshy. And warm.

It giggled.

A face peeked out of the mist, just as one would peek from behind a curtain before a vaudeville show.

A woman. A plump woman. She stepped forward and I could see her clad in a pink pinafore type dress with a white apron. Well, a once-white apron with tattered lace trim trailing onto the ground.

Rounded cheeks with a rosy spot on each, button nose, and full double chin. Bright blue eyes sparkled at me until she saw Marrigold. She backed into the fog, tripping and falling backwards until all we could see were the bottoms of her feet through her shoes.

I discreetly patted my way to where her hands should be and helped her up.

She pointed. "What?"

"Marrigold, the horse." I gasped. "You can see her."

"Of course I can see her. She's a ... horse?"

“Yes. You don’t know what a horse is?”

She shook her head. Oh, there was a bonnet that hung from the back of her head. I helped her straighten it. She patted it in place, all the while staring at Marrigold.

“And ... if I may, what exactly is a horse?”

I glanced at Marrigold. “Well, it’s a ... well, friend, mostly. Sometimes a helper. But most times she is.” I nodded, satisfied with my answer. “She is.” I cleared my throat and held out my hand. “Excuse me. I don’t mean to be rude. I am Nitram.” I bowed low, then upright. “I am a carrier and I am looking for a person or persons named Epoh. I have something of importance to deliver to ... them.”

The plump little woman bowed, and I noticed the oddest thing. As her head rolled down, there was no back of her head. Well, there was a back, but it was as flat as a sign.

I took her hand in mine. It was warm, but each finger was flat, too, not round like mine.

Marrigold nickered a low growl and nudged me. I followed her eyes to a spot in the fog and soon more flat people emerged. Many sizes and shapes. Some had no face or body, only legs or one leg, with spider like feet at the bottom, so they skittered along the ground. They had a sign for a head. One said ‘Fresh Eggs Here.’ Another sported a sign, ‘Randal’s Diner ~ Fresh Pie.’ ‘Chickens for Sale.’ I shook my head.

The sash on the woman’s dress said, ‘Dolly Flour.’ A smudge of white dusted her chin. Ahh. Flour.

“Do you know where Epoh dwells? Is it near here?” I hoped my travel through the fog was at an end.



Faces or signs nodded all over, causing the fog to swirl.

“Well, who can tell me?”

A hand raised in the back. The Sign People parted to make room.

Marrigold growled so low that I suspect only I heard her.

The people nodded and bowed, as a tiny round face sign with cobwebs dangling from the top of the sign made her way through. She was a girl because she had a ribbon twined in with the cobwebs. Her face sign read, “Beware.” That’s it. No more. Her legs looked like sticks, but as she shuffled nearer, I could see words down each leg. Book spines. No wonder she was so wobbly as she worked her way toward me.

She bowed low. I suppose since she had book spines for legs, she was more flexible than others who had wooden fence posts or metal rails for legs. As she righted herself, I read her face again. “Beware” in large black letters on an orange background. Startling.

How do you talk to a sign?

Her little arms were made of book pages lined with words and rolled up. A finger pointed off one arm. I could just make out some words as she brought it to her ... chest. I think it read, “... walketh about as a roaring lion ...” That was all I could read.

But I knew the verse—well.

She pulled a paper from the book that formed her body, hesitated, then showed it to me.

I bent down to read it. “Epoh doesn’t live here anymore. He moved out after the tornadoes.”

“Tornadoes?” The Sign People moved closer and the fog parted enough to see. Papers everywhere, but all organized into piles the same size or shape. As I drew closer, one pile was all pictures of people. People mind you. No sign heads. One pile was pictures of trucks or vehicles.

Pieces of wood stacked together. Splinters swept into a pile.

They saved everything. I suppose that was frugal. They used everything to rebuild themselves.

“But I have something for him.” I paced between the piles. The Sign People backed away. “How can I give it to him if he isn’t here?” I patted my pack. “What of this gift?”

I looked from Sign to Sign. They stepped into place beside each other, forming a line of sorts. I couldn’t possibly ignore the words on each Sign.

“Begin.”

“Embrace the Palms.”

“Palms?”

“Ray’s Diner.”

“Ray? Diner?” I shook my head. “Wait. Is this a message or ... instructions? Directions?” On down the line I went, reading each word until Beware shook her head hard and cobwebs flew onto her neighbor’s face. Beware backed out and jumped into another place in line. She shook her head and stomped her foot, making part of the book spine shift and fall to the dirt. She limped to the end of the line where she stayed.

Back to the line.

I began again. “Embrace. Diner. Or Ray’s. Embrace Ray’s. That makes little sense.” I threw up my hands. “In fact, none of this makes sense.”

All heads nodded, the signs that could smile, smiled and nodded.

“Okay. Embrace Ray’s Diner.” My stomach rumbled. “Fairy dust.”

She switched places.

“Embrace Ray’s Corner Spot.” I stepped down the line. “U Turn.”

A quick reorder of Sign People. Another U Turn sign. Back on track.

“Pay Toll.” Only the letter r had been scribbled to spell troll. “Pay Troll?” The sign grinned and held out it’s hand.

I reached into my pocket and dropped a coin in it’s hand.

“Slow Vehicles With 5 or More Following Vehicles Must Use Turn-Out.” I stepped closer and noticed the 5 was crossed out and 27 written in.

“Keep Right Except to Pass. Turn right? Turn right after ... Ray’s Corner?” Were these signs from another place?

Every sign got excited. A couple who could, jumped up and down.

“Turn right again? Or just remember to turn right?”

The sign nodded.

“Authorized Vehicles Only.” I held out my hands in utter confusion. “No, wait. Are you authorized?”

Signs made sounds now. Squeaks and grinds. All who could, pointed at me.

“I’m the authorized vehicle?”

Some clapped. Some laughed or jumped up and down.

“Pay Parking.” I reached into my pocket again. I went to drop the coin, but no hand. The Sign turned around and on it’s back was a small coin drop. “Handy. For you.”

“Trucks Over Ten Tons Must Enter Weigh Station Next Right.” I patted my stomach. “I don’t weight even ... oh, just turn right.”

Nods.

“Path Narrows.”

“9% Grade.”

“Next 7 Miles.”

“What? Seven miles?” I held my head. “I’ve come so far.”

The sign waved it’s hands and another sign crossed off miles and wrote yards.

“Whew! That’s better. I’ve come a long way and I need to accomplish my mission.”

“Pavement Ends.”

“Soft Shoulder.”

Awes from all signs.

“Grooved Pavement. But someone changed it to Groovy.”

Smiles.

“You have a sense of humor, I’ll add.”

“Candy’s Bar and Grill.”

Silence.

My stomach growled.

“Picture of an animal.” I cocked my head, trying to get a new perspective on it. “Looks like a donkey. Donkey Crossing?”

Applause.

“Who’s the donkey?”

All arms, sticks, tools, parts pointed at me.

Not nice. Funny, but not nice.

“Dead End.”

“Ahead.”

“All Traffic Must Exit. So I’m almost be there, right?”

Nods.

“Bus Lane Ends.”

“End.”

“End. You mean I’d be there?” I stepped forward. “Let’s go.”

Ahead. “Look! Palm trees. And a street sign still standing said ‘Ray’s’.”

I pointed to the sign. “Corner Spot. Spot on! Skip the U-Turn and I paid the Troll.”

Whew. “Turn Right. I paid the Parking sign.”

The sign smiled. I nodded.

I turned right. “It must be important to turn right.” I checked the road to see if I had gone straight. A “Bridge Washed Out” sign jumped in the way. Gotcha.

“Pavement ends? Dead End?” I looked up. “I must be at the place, right?”

Marrigold skidded to a stop right next to me. She nodded and nickered. How did she know the way?

All nodded and sang and jumped and clapped. The first sign woman pointed at Marrigold. “Horse.”

I laughed. “You’re learning.”

There was no building, only debris. Nothing standing, just pieces lying around. I patted my pouch.

“Hello.” I hollered a little loudly. “Anybody here?”

Something rustled, but I saw no sign.

“Please come out. I have a gift for you. This is my mission to deliver it to you. We are friendly.”

More rustling noises.

A little girl peeked from under a wooden wall. Those dead, sweet eyes.

A flute pushed out, followed by the boy. Then another boy and then a girl ... maybe.

“I saw you before.” I pointed. “On the road.”

When everyone was assembled in front of me, the Sign People behind me, I reached inside my pouch and pulled out a very small card with four letters on it.

The children’s eyes widened.

“That spells—”

“That spells ... h o—”

“HOP.”

They looked at each other, faces of confusion.

“No. Not hop. HOPE. Hope.” The oldest child began to dance. “He brought us hope.”

All the children began to dance and laugh together. The Sign People joined in. I laughed and clapped along.

As we danced, we gathered debris, stacked it, organized it. Fixed it. Moved it.

Built it.

Until.

A Sign Person stepped in front and sat.

“Hope Springs Eternal.”

