



## O THE FOREST O

**I** had always been afraid of the forest, that dark and unknown place at the farthest edge of my little world. At night, I often dreamed of it and woke chilled with fear. The fear was there in the day, too, hidden inside me no matter what I did or where I went.

**O**ne night, the fear pressed so heavily on me that I could bear it no longer.

In the morning, standing in the doorway of my home, I saw the cozy chair by the fire, my warm bed, the objects I loved.



I turned and closed the door behind me. I walked through the village that I knew like the back of my hand. I passed the shops and houses laid out in their familiar order and followed the long curve of the street.



On the high road, my heart began to race. I no longer felt like myself, but small and alone in the big world.

I walked on and on, past unknown farms and fields, until the paved road ended.

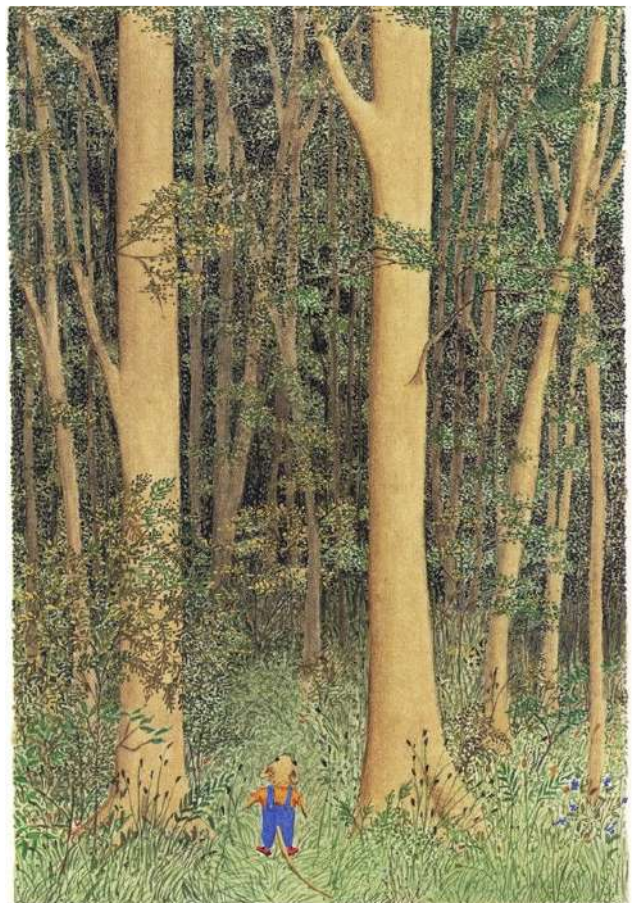


Uneasy, I looked back at my village—a dot in the distance.

Looming before me, shaking its many heads slowly in the wind, stood the forest.



Should I turn back? Should I run back, heart racing, to the safety of my house?



No, I had come too far.

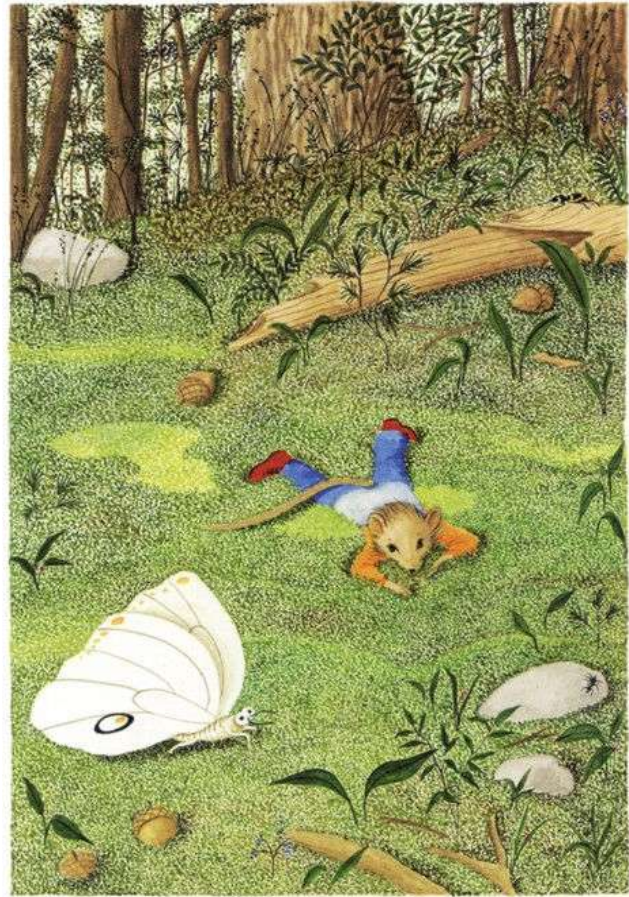
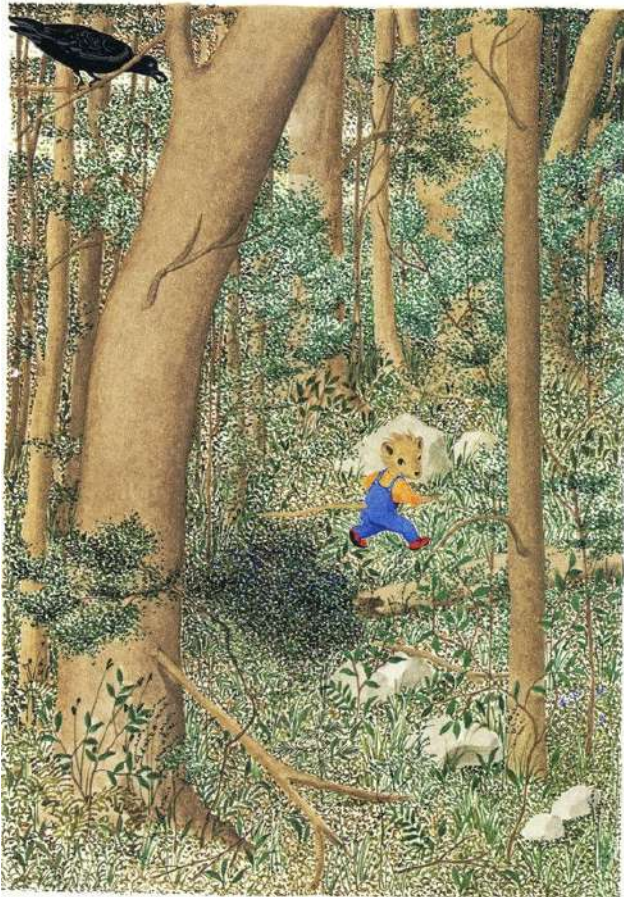
But would I lose myself? Would I be devoured by some wild creature?

Would I die of fear?

**I** stepped inside the forest, between two pillar trees that stood like a gateway.

My heart was pounding. A sharp birdcall from behind made me jump. Something cracked nearby, and a dark shadow moved swiftly toward me, coming closer and closer. Leaping for cover, I tripped and I fell headlong to the ground.

Lie still, I thought; if you cry or move, you will be found. Could my thundering heart be heard outside my head?

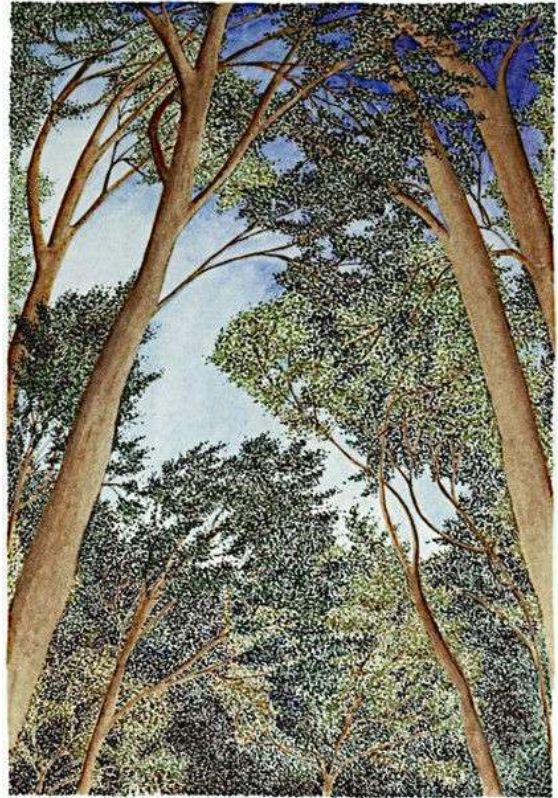


When I opened my eyes, my nose was deep in moss, a forest of tiny trees, as soft as feathers. The sunlight was raining down through the leaves and warming my back. A sweet breeze stirred my fur.

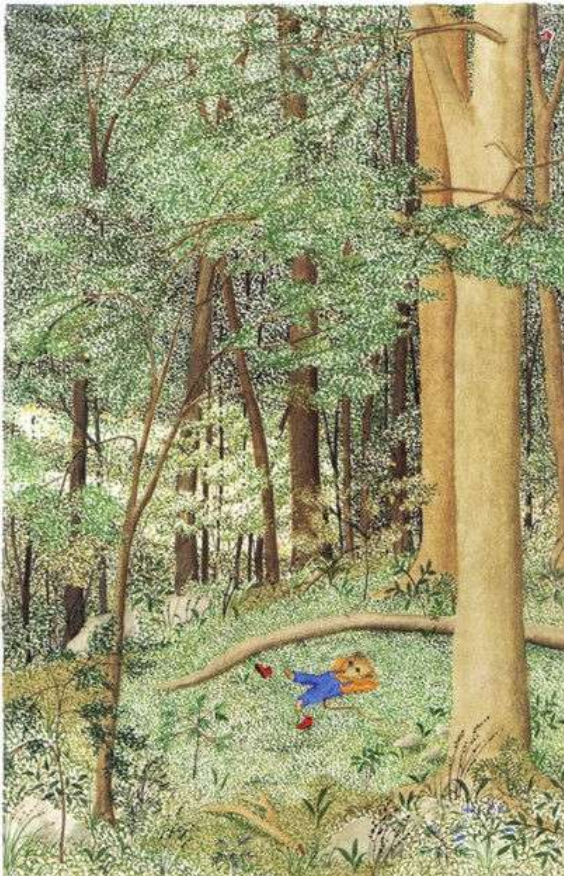
I was alive!

How long had I been here?

A butterfly opened and shut its wings nearby, like a guardian angel.



I listened. All around me a million leaves whispered and rustled gently. I rolled over and, for the first time, looked up.



High above, I saw the sky. The sky was bigger than the forest, bigger even than my fear had been, bigger than everything.

I lay there—a speck in this enormous beauty—until the light began to fade.

Then, with the sweet murmuring world of the forest filling me, I walked the long way home.

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*The Forest*  
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