

Every child deserves a magic forest.

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Robert John Andrews

“Zanzibar”

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Below the Penningtonville Presbyterian Church, Atglen, Pennsylvania, trickled Valley Creek, flowing into the Octorara Creek west of the village at the old mill. There the creek picked up both volume and speed as it meandered its western way through Lancaster County, eventually flowing into the Susquehanna below the Conowingo Dam, thence onto the far ocean. A narrow road accompanies the creek its winding way. At the old mill you would turn left and go down a bit, then, before you come to the covered bridge, you would take the right turn toward the gun club. Passing the locked gate to the gun club and the rusting drum used for garbage, you would enter the land of their special private paradise, called Zanzibar. At least that is the secret name of this stretch of the creek. I traveled back to Zanzibar while getting retrained as a mandatory reporter for suspected child abuse, as all clergy are by law. No crumpled beer cans could be seen there nor charred logs of spent bonfires giving evidence of the drinking parties by High School kids.

After our son was born, Margaret felt a twinged miffed. Mac required much of Mom's attention and Margaret demanded attention of her own. She already had explored every book in her nursery anyway, so three year old Margaret and Daddy started creating their own stories. They'd pack a picnic lunch of apple juice and sandwiches and head out toward Zanzibar.

This little girl never traveled to Zanzibar alone, for her bestest friend, a little furry fellow, orange and brown, named Gooney was kept cuddled in her arms, while her other almost as furry friend sat nearby and drove the car. Zanzibar was a special place visited often by these special three whenever they felt the need for an adventure or just to escape from the average. Zanzibar always was merely a horizon away, filled with magic and mystery, the dark trees waving in the wind, branches hanging thickly over the trail. Faeries fluttered from tree to tree. Nymphs splashed, scaring monsters away, for there be monsters. Wildflowers laughed along the bank of the stream, nestling into the tree roots. Sometimes they would skip on the planks inside the covered bridge and yell, listening to the echo. Every child deserves a magic forest.

The trees, pushing out from granite outcroppings, leaned over the creek, and the chanting water glimmered when the sunlight shone through the leaves of the swaying branches. The creek wound for miles without a house nearby. Rarely would another car disturb their reverie. Sometimes they'd eat in the station wagon. Sometimes they'd follow an angler's path and, after checking for water moccasin, we'd sit on a log along the creek bank. They'd talk about how sharks sometimes would sneak up the Chesapeake and steal their way up the Susquehanna, and sometimes they'd swim all the way up the Octorara. Octopus too. They'd throw rocks, startling brook trout and suckers. They'd poke sticks in holes looking for eels.

Then one very sad morning a big yellow school bus motored to the church intersection and took the little girl away. This little girl, with puzzled eyes, looked out from the other side of the window as the big yellow bus pulled away. She looked back at her friend standing helplessly on the sidewalk, who now held in his arms her bestest friend, her eyes imploring: "Why are you letting them take me away? Why are you sending me away?" Both furry friends wondered too.

The bus later did bring her back but that yellow bus had transformed her. Buses do that to little girls. She wiggled in excitement as she trotted down the steps and she gushed to her friends how much fun she had and they read they played on the swing and Marcy cried a little but then they shared all sorts of crayons and paint and all the newer bestest friends she had met. His heart broke. Another sacrifice to the river gods. Other places and newer friends had intruded. It got harder for the three of them to find the way back to Zanzibar. The one friend she once cuddled in her arms got left by her pillow every morning, till eventually he tattered away and disappeared into a dresser drawer, where Gooney still sleeps. Her other friend wasn't much nearby much anymore either. Soon he too had other places he had to go. Important places, so he pretended, like meetings and negotiating congregational conflicts