

Now, it's important to note this type of adventure takes a certain amount of prep work and I've learned over the years that a person can't just begin haphazardly, you know, without some sort of system in place.

Sometimes I make adjustments to my routine (*like what I'm wearing for example; but I usually throw on a pair of shorts and an old t-shirt*), just to keep things fresh and interesting, but for the most part, there are two very specific things that I would never dare change.

First of all, before I even step foot off Grandma's property, I always give myself some time to mentally prepare for my journey; which really just involves hanging out on the hill next to Grandma's house to yank a bunch of grass from the ground while I sit and talk to God-*not to be confused with praying to God, because I think that just involves asking Him for a bunch of stuff.*

I don't know that for sure though, I just know that when I watch other people pray they never say anything out loud, they just bow their heads with their eyes closed and clasp their hands together. I assume the reason they don't say anything out loud is either because they don't want people around them to know what they're asking for or they're making grocery lists inside

their heads. I suppose it could also have something to do with the fact that we're Methodists.

Grandma says God can hear our thoughts, but I like to talk to Him out loud. First of all, it keeps me from dozing off (*I've seen people in church doze off while they're praying-especially the old people, and I know they're asleep because I can hear them snoring*). And secondly, sometimes my thoughts get all jumbled up inside my head, which could be confusing to God and make it difficult for Him to keep up with me, so I just think it's better to talk to Him out loud. The way I see it, it's really just thinking out loud, except God is listening.

My conversations with God aren't really much different than the ones I have with anyone else. I usually just say whatever pops in my head and it turns into a conversation.

They started a few summers ago, after my dog, Scruples, got run over by a car. Scruples lived thankfully, but I remember at the time I cried a lot, because I was really scared he was going to die and I felt helpless because I didn't know what to do; there really wasn't anything I could do actually. So I prayed to God about it and asked Him "*to please make Scruples better,*" and He did. I was so amazed and grateful after that, I felt like we should have a relationship that involved more than just asking

for stuff, so I decided I'd talk to God whenever I felt like it and not necessarily just when I need something.

"Hi, God, it's Luna." I imagine a lot of people talk to God at the same time, so even though I'm pretty sure He knows who I am, I still feel like I need to introduce myself; just to be polite, and announce that I'm here.

I take a seat in the grass to tie my dangling shoelaces and jump right into the conversation.

"I'm just going to cut to the chase, because I'm pretty sure you already know what I saw yesterday and I'm thinking if I retrace my steps from yesterday, I should be able to find it again," I stress assertively.

"I'm just not sure what I should do if I see it again today," I subtly plead, indirectly seeking some sort of guidance.

"I suppose it would be best if I just investigate it a little more and then decide," I rationalize, suddenly uncertain about the whole thing now.

"I mean, it could turn out to be nothing because I'll admit my imagination does play tricks on me sometimes, but if it's what I think it is, I hope I get some sort of sign that explains why it's there, and also what I should do about it or *if* I should

even do anything at all," I add tentatively, still yanking chunks of grass from the ground.

Thoroughly engrossed on my end of the conversation, I continue to ramble.

"Maybe I'm over-thinking this, but if it isn't there or I can't find my way back to it, I'm ok with that too," I reason, trying to convince myself and God that I'll be satisfied no matter what the outcome.

"I'm sure you know I'm really good at entertaining myself," I add proudly.

Since I'm an only child, I figured out a long time ago that unless I wanted to be utterly bored with my life, I really have no choice but to find ways to entertain myself. I prefer to be myself anyway, since most of the kids my age annoy the crap out of me.

"I also want to thank you for the really nice weather," I say inconsequentially. "I would've been disappointed if it had rained today because my grandma doesn't let me play outside when it's raining, let alone venture into the woods; she's afraid of thunderstorms and worries about me getting caught in one...she worries about *everything*," I add ruefully.

I'm temporarily distracted as I glance over my right shoulder to the horse pasture that belongs to my grandma's neighbor-*at least the only one we know of, but I'm sure that's going to change soon.* I see both horses, Corky and Sabrina, standing at the fence and I'm tempted to walk up and feed them all of the grass I've just yanked out of the ground, but then I realize that would delay my adventure, so I decide to stack the grass in a neat pile and save it for my return.

"I'd like to sit here and talk to you longer, but I'm actually running out of things to talk about," I admit hurriedly, trying to wrap up the conversation.

"I guess we can talk some more while I'm out exploring in the woods, but just so you know, I'm going to have to pay really close attention to where I'm going and I can't get distracted. I also tend to spend a *lot* of time singing and talking to the dogs," I add emphatically. "So if you don't hear from me again, that's why," I explain, hoping God would understand.

I pause for a moment and look up at the sky, studying its limitlessness I imagine a whole other world above me, *God with His long list of people and all,* and realize He probably has a lot to do.

"It was really nice talking to you. I'm going to go now...Bye!"
I conclude, realizing I have a lot to do too.

I swiftly jump to my feet and swipe my hands across the backside of my shorts, brushing the remaining bits of grass off my hands, thoroughly satisfied with my mental preparation. Then I cup both hands around my mouth and shout through my makeshift megaphone "*Wagons...Needle Teeth!*" and instantly, both dogs come rushing toward me.

They're running so fast, that it makes them look a bit crazy, with their eyes bugging out of their heads and their tongues hanging off to the side from their mouths, flopping around this way and that; they hardly look real to me. In fact, they actually look more like a couple of stupid cartoon dogs. *I secretly kind of wish they were cartoon dogs though, because then they could talk.*

I'm nearly knocked to the ground as they greet me, both of them circling me with their big butts banging up against my legs, excited to see me and begging for my attention.

"Hey girl," I address Wagons, an old yellow mutt (*no, not Old Yeller*, but actually an old, yellow-colored dog). She's really big and fluffy with long yellow hair that drapes all over her body and covers her whole face, making it hard to see her eyes.

I don't know how she even sees where she's going. Her hairdo kind of reminds me of the big blue brushes at the drive-thru car wash.

I briskly rub my hands up and down Wagons' back, intentionally messing up her hair, as she bobs her butt up and down all the while, thoroughly enjoying the rub-down. But then Needle-Teeth, *who obviously has jealousy issues*, rudely interrupts, nudging his long black snout against the back of my hand, as if to say to his sister, "*scoot over Bitch, it's my turn!*" I'm sure that's what he would say if he was a cartoon dog and could talk.

Needle Teeth is a really tall but skinny, Doberman Pincher, and because he hasn't outgrown his puppy phase yet, he likes to playfully bite my fingers, which is ok I guess because I know he doesn't mean to, except his teeth are really, really sharp. I don't have any idea what his real name is so I just call him "Needle Teeth," which I think is a fitting nickname.

After giving both dogs equal attention, the three of us proceed toward the woods, Wagons and Needle Teeth following closely on my heels...the *other* thing about my routine that I would *never* dare change.

When I started these adventures a few years ago, it was just Wagons and me. I didn't exactly invite her to come along

either. I just had this weird feeling, like I was being followed and it was unsettling really. I was sort of hesitant to turn around at the time, scared it might be Big Foot or even worse, a mountain lion, but I was relieved when I turned around and discovered that luckily it was just Wagons. She stayed beside me the whole time I was in the woods that day, sniffing around and peeing on trees; you know, normal dog stuff.

Then last year, Wagons' owners adopted Needle Teeth, and of course he thinks he has to go wherever Wagons goes. I don't like him as much as I do Wagons, which I suppose is probably because I haven't known him as long as I've known Wagons. He also isn't as laid back and calm as her, in fact, he's kind of crazy, but I don't think it would be fair to make him stay behind so he's allowed to come too, just so he doesn't feel left out. Besides, I think he's also good for protection because he's so big and has such sharp teeth he can be kind of intimidating, so I'm sure most people would probably be afraid of him, even though he's actually kind of an idiot.

Anyway, I've learned over the years that my adventures have been much more interesting when the dogs are with me. Besides the fact that they're really good companions, they're also really good at sniffing out all sorts of neat stuff that I assume an ordinary human nose probably wouldn't be able to smell.

As I sprint toward the woods, the dogs trot along obediently beside me. And when we arrive at the woods' shadowy entrance I pause for a moment, scanning the depths of it, as I prepare to enter. It's like a whole other world, and I'm about to step out of the real world and right into an alternate universe.

The trees are mysterious and seem alive in a peculiar way, like they have a personality of their own. I imagine if they actually came to life and were able to speak somehow, they might eerily say "*Enter at your own risk, small human. Welcome to our mysterious land,*" inviting me into their creepy family.

I listen to the leaves sizzle and hiss as they flutter on the trees around me. The sound is magnified in a way from the otherwise still and vacant forest. I also hear the birds singing; which kind of eases my trepidations in a way, I figure if the birds feel safe in here, so do I. I duck down to protect my head from the low-hanging branches at the wooded entrance and step carefully onto the trail.

The worn dirt path I've walked over the years is even less visible than it was last summer, hidden beneath a blanket of leaves, fallen brush, and overgrown weeds from years of neglect; its outline is vague and almost impossible to detect anymore.

"Thank goodness I know this trail like the back of my hand," I murmur aloud, in an effort to ease my anxiety.

If there really is someone living out here, they really should think about taking better care of the place. I extend both my arms out in front of me to shield my face from the random branches that dart out haphazardly along both sides of the path and clear the way like a crazed zombie, batting aside one ruthless branch after another as I slowly navigate into the woods.

The further I walk, the more distant the real world feels. I can barely sense it anymore, like it magically vanished behind me. And then a hush falls over the woods, and suddenly everything is really quiet, like I've just been sucked inside a vacuum.

It's sort of the same feeling I get when I'm riding in the back seat of the car with my whole family and all the windows are rolled down and so of course, everyone in the car is screaming at each other because the wind roars so loudly past the windows you can't hear anything anyone is saying. But then someone complains that it's too hot, so we have to roll all the windows up to turn the air conditioning on, and then the inside of the car gets really quiet all of sudden, so we have to peer through the rolled up windows and watch as the real world passes by us,

but it's like we're no longer really a part of it. *Sometimes everyone's still screaming at each other though, it just depends on the topic.*

"Shut de door...keep out the devil...shut de door...keep the devil outside," I chant aloud as I trample over the fallen brush, still uneasy about the ominous surroundings. I actually think that being in the woods all alone can get a little creepy sometimes so singing makes it a little less creepy. Anyway, I think this is a really good song and is also effective at keeping the devil away...and probably monsters and Big Foot too because I've never seen any of them; *except that one time I saw Big Foot.*

The butterflies flutter and dance inside my stomach as I continue further on the trail, filled with anticipation, I can't wait to see if what I found yesterday was really real or if it's what Grandma thinks is *all in my head.*

I'm making really good time, pleased with myself that I'm already halfway there, *at least that's what I keep telling myself.* I really don't have a clue where I am, or what time it is exactly, and I'm starting to think I probably should've better prepared myself for this adventure.

I would've made it further if I hadn't been for the large vine hanging from a tree that caught my attention earlier, which of course, I had to stop to swing on for a bit - *everyone knows that you should always stop and swing if you're lucky enough to find a vine, that's what they're there for.*

And while I was swinging I could've sworn I saw a monkey hanging from the tree branch above me. Of course, right away I heard my grandma's voice in my head "*you have quite an imagination, Luna,*" blah, blah, blah. But then I thought about it and realized that it can't be that every single thing I see is only *in my head.* Just because other people can't see the things I see doesn't mean they don't exist.

Anyway, I'm sure it was a monkey's tail wrapped around the branch; I assume so he wouldn't fall. But then he unraveled it like a slinky, jumped to another tree and disappeared. I spent a long while wondering if I could catch him because I think it'd be neat to have a monkey for a pet. I searched the whole area, looking up to the tops of the trees as far as I could see, but there wasn't any sign of him. Then I thought about what I'd name him and decided I'd call him Chip if I saw him again.

Then I had to pee, which can be really frustrating. First of all, I have to find somewhere to squat so the dogs can't watch, *because that's just weird.* And I also have to be careful I

don't do it near poison ivy because that would be awful - I imagine grandma would have a heyday with her Campho-Phenique. I'm sure she'd grip the bottle like a mad scientist and hover impatiently over me, but of course I won't cooperate, so she'd probably say *'pull your shorts down young lady!'* And I'd probably say *'NO WAY!'* Then she'd probably shout *'it'll help the itching.'* And I'd promptly reply *'YOU'RE NOT COMING ANYWHERE NEAR MY BUTT WITH THAT CRAP!'* So, it's important I do everything possible to avoid poison ivy. And then of course there's the struggle once I pull my shorts down because I have to stretch them back really far so I don't get pee on them, and I also have to try and keep my balance the whole time I'm peeing so I don't fall in the pee or pee on my shoes.

Sometimes I wish I was a boy - especially when I'm out in the woods and I have to pee. But since I'm a girl, I've discovered that it's really much easier and works best if I'm able to find a log or something to squat over. I think it's against the law to pee outside, but I'm also pretty sure they make an exception if it's in the woods.

"Ok, from now on, we're not going to let anything else distract us." I say to the dogs as I finish zipping up my shorts, carefully navigating through the briars as I make my way back onto the obscure trail. They obediently looked up at me in

agreement, as if they understand the instructions I've just given them. I know neither one of them has a clue though. I don't think it really matters what you say to dogs; I could've said "*you're a couple of morons! Yes, you are, you're so stupid!*" and they'd respond just the same. As long as I have a smile on my face and use a high-pitch tone, they think I've just paid them a compliment.

The further I walk the more I wish I would've paid closer attention to the path I took yesterday, because nothing around me looks familiar anymore and all the fun is starting to wear off. This adventure of mine isn't going at all as planned and so I'm beginning to think maybe this was a stupid idea.

Feeling discouraged and tired from walking around to what seems like nowhere, I decide to stop for a while and give my legs a rest. As I lean my back against a tree I begin hesitantly, "hi again, it's me, Luna," gradually working up the courage to admit to God that I don't know what I'm doing and would like some help.

"So, this isn't working out at all the way I thought it would," I finally admit, feeling discouraged.

"You know I don't like to ask for help, so I'm thinking maybe if you just point me in the right direction that would help, a lot. And then I can take it from there," I try to compromise.

I don't really expect to get a direct answer, because God never says anything out loud. I really never know what He's saying to me unless I can feel it in my gut. *That's why I don't like to ask Him for a bunch of stuff, I'm afraid there isn't enough room inside my gut for all of that information, so I usually try really hard to figure things out myself.*

I close my eyes and focus all my energy on my stomach, concentrating really hard and hoping that soon I'll have a gut full of invisible answers. *I wish I knew how He does that.*

"Maybe Grandma's right. It was probably just my imagination after all," I say ruefully, acknowledging the setback aloud. I'm not feeling anything in my stomach yet, except for the peanut butter sandwich I ate earlier. I'm pretty sure God won't let me down though. After all, He did save Scruples.

Refusing to give up, I'm thinking maybe if I rub my stomach, it might speed up the process. So I stretch my legs out in front of me, place my hands on the middle of my stomach and start rubbing giant circles all over it.

After a minute or so of this, I'm still not feeling anything, so I rub it faster and make even bigger circles. This really doesn't make me feel anything either, except a little hungry, and now I wish I'd thought to bring a snack.

And then, just as I'm about to give up and head back to the house so that my grandma could fix me another sandwich - BAM! I suddenly feel something. And it's as though God shifted the whole universe all at once, just for me.

It's exactly how my stomach feels when I'm eating spaghetti except I don't chew the noodles all the way before I swallow them. Right now, it feels like I've just swallowed a bunch of spaghetti noodles completely whole and they're slithering around and tickling me on the inside now.

I know it's a sign from God.

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