

I wandered through a strange place. That place in that time was scarier than anything I had seen before or known since. And I hope never to go there again. The days and nights I wandered were the most confusing and treacherous days of my life. Some days, reality mimics the memories all too closely, but they are only memories; they exist in the past. I do not wish to forget the past. It has served, and still serves to teach me lessons I could not have experienced without its dark days and nights. Some say that he who does not know history is condemned to repeat it. I say that he who does not know his own history will always repeat it, condemning himself and often hurting those around him – especially those closest to him. The following is my history.

All I can see is a dusty path, overgrown with weeds of doubt. The doubt challenges me to take each step. I have become accustomed to the doubt. It has grown so wild and free that I no longer have direction. People pass along the road. I used to want to talk to them, interact, establish something meaningful, but now doubt looks at me from behind them, and I look away. The weeds separate us altogether. These are my moments of deepest despair. When I am on the road, where I once saw people, I now see creatures. These creatures distract me. They play in the weeds, calling my name, separating me further from the hopes, joys, worthwhile goals, and people about whom I used to care. The creatures make it seem wrong for me to hold onto hope or any good thing – this place is so dreary. Each creature has its own entity, and tempts with its respective vice. Discontent is a toad watching me with a stoic expression. Fear is a serpent hissing at me. Hate is a black widow spider weaving her web around me; her red emblem mesmerizing as she passes over me again and again. There are others too. The cats are called Apathy (by the dogs of course). The dogs in turn are called Envy by the cats. Annoyance is a fly. Sloth is, well, a sloth. In the midst of the creatures and weeds grows a tree – the favorite tree of the creatures. The creatures call the tree Good Times. They lead me closer to the tree and show me the names carved into the bark. “Look at all the happy people who have visited this tree; you could be the next.” It seemed too easy. I got scared. The creatures sensed my fear and began reassuring me. “There is no hurry, no need to be scared, you can come back whenever you like.” I am cautious about approaching the tree. It seems too good to be true, but my curiosity is leading me back. As I move closer to the tree, the creatures call me again. Slowly, I begin to believe the spider’s whispers, to be soothed by the snake’s soft hiss. The low drumming of the toad lulls me. I sympathize with the dogs. I follow them, at first not willingly, although a comfort is arising from their presence, their sounds, even their smells. It becomes easier and easier to follow them back to the tree, certainly easier than following all the rules of life. Following those rules is pain. But in time, following the creatures becomes the bigger pain. Their games lead down a path to nowhere; in fact it is no path at all – it is a wilderness. The lies of the creatures’ eventually expose them. Their “path” is misery. The contradictions become manifest. Work hard to get what you want. Take it easy; it’s no big deal. Love those who love you. Hate those who love you, because sometimes they hate you too. Fear says, “Take it easy.” Hate says, “Get them while you can.” Discontent is mad at both. They begin to argue and fight with each other. They coerce me to join their fight, but they are already beaten and battered. They look terrible, but

they are good at hiding their wounds (leaves from the vine of pride assist them in covering their shameful scars). The more they fight, the more they want to fight. They fight until they are burning red with anger. Their faces swell from Hate's intoxication. They seem to grow. They become more imposing. But whenever they near each other, they are thrown down. They do not give up. They try again and again, with seemingly no end to their energy. I shudder with fear. I look down. I see my feet. While the creatures fight, while they draw my attention to their games and fights, the weeds of the path continue to grow. By the time I take a second to look away from the fighting, the sharp-edged weeds are wrapped around my feet, digging in, drawing blood. I can no longer move. I am helpless. Somewhere in the distance a faint voice is shouting,

“What good is your meaning[lessness]  
In late modern times?  
These are your gods?  
These will help you live?  
What have they done?”

“Or is it you?  
Do you hold the key?  
The mind of God, does it dwell in you?  
Can you grasp it, feel it, show it to me?  
If you can, please do,  
But if not, shut up.  
Your thought is simple,  
Yet reason too complex.  
You look around and talk aloud.  
Everyone listens,  
But no one believes.”

The creatures laugh at this man. “He's crazy, no one listens to him. He stands there all day spewing forth his crazy talk.” After they say this, they notice my feet. They see the sharp weeds are now choking my ankles so tightly they are bleeding. They laugh hysterically. “Can't take it? What's the matter, can't deal with a little pain? A little shed blood never hurt anybody.” The fact that they dragged me into this situation is apparently slipping their minds. It is all their fault, right? They tricked me, didn't they? I guess I was curious at first, but that is all it was, curiosity, right? It cannot be my fault. But somehow I think it might be my fault. I do not know whom to blame anymore. I liked the games. I liked the comfort of the creatures – the creature comforts. I chose to answer their beckoning. But now I do not know what to think, what to do. Nothing makes sense... I am hurting... I am falling... I am empty... I am nothing... I need help. Time is slowing down.

My heart feels like it is going to pop out of my chest each time it beats. And then I feel it stop. The ground shakes. The trees tremble. Leaves fall everywhere. I stand frozen... I stand helpless... The creatures knock me down many times, but at this moment, and from this moment on, they cannot keep me down. Something not within my own power is lifting me up – repeatedly. I want to fall. I want to give into the creatures and the weeds. I want it to be over. But it cannot be over. He will not let it be over. He cannot forget me or leave me.

But who is He? Where is He coming from? After a short time He makes me see that I can trip and stumble, but I will not fall. He knows this, and smiles. Did He smile? I think I saw Him smile. He is right here. He has been here the whole time. He is the Rock of the path, the Rock covered for so long by layers of dust. The Rock then arises beneath me, lifting me up. I am no longer frozen. I can move, but I do not have to. He is standing over the creatures and they run to their holes, the only remnant of their shameful safety. The leaves covering their scars fall off and they are exposed, they are ugly.

Now this place does not seem so scary. Now the creatures hide, not completely off the path; they still have their strongholds in cracks and potholes, but their fights no longer consume. They plant weeds to cover their holes and vines to mask their scars, but the weeds are small and their vines bear few leaves. The weeds grow and reach for me, but only in vain. Long ago, the Master of the land laid a path of solid Rock through their pathetic territory. The Rock of the road is strong. It is beautiful. It shines like gold for those who need it most. It gives Hope. It is Hope.

Some say the path to hell is wide and straight. But for me that picture isn't scary enough. For me, the path to hell is a vast and expansive jungle. There are things to look at and touch in every direction. Some sights even lead a traveler back down the same scary section of path he has already visited, but the traveler does not realize it. For me, that intriguing sight, that blinding attraction, is the creature's tree. The name of the tree, the one the creatures call Good Times, is actually very different than what the creatures call it. For those walking the path, the real name of the tree is Free Will. But for the creatures, and for those befriending the creatures, the name of the tree is synonymous with the result of playing with, and abusing the tree – Guilt. I played the creatures' games for too long. I found out why the creatures want me to join their game only after playing their games for many years. They want someone else to share in their guilt and shame.

There are many other distractions: shrubs, breezes, birds, even sunsets and sunrises. I do not know how these did not overcome me. There was another with me, but I could not see, hear, or sense this in any way. I think I saw Him once, but perhaps not with my eyes. It does not matter anyway. He was there. He is here. Maybe I will see Him again, but that does not matter either. He was always there. He will always be here. While He remains, hope remains.

These days are better than the nightmare of the past years, but doubt still remains. There will always be doubt. As long as the creatures tempt with their games, doubt remains. But He will not let it consume me. I often wonder what the rest of the path before me holds. I often wonder if I have the strength. The next step might always be scary, perhaps the scariest ever – but it will always have Hope.