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# **Reasons She Goes to the Woods**

Written by Deborah Kay Davies

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# Reasons She Goes to the Woods



Deborah Kay Davies



ONE WORLD

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*As always,  
for Norman,  
with love.*

## Pearl and her Father

Pearl is perched astride her father's knee. Rain taps the front window and she can just make out, all along the wavering hedge, wet purple flowers that look just like miniature bunches of grapes. Here in the lounge the lamplight reaches out to rest on the carpet ridges and the stiff pleats bordering the cushions. She and her father are in a hideaway; he sits on the yellow-and-navy settee and she sits on him. It's wonderful. But it makes her stomach growl, every time she's with him. She plays with his sleep-soft hands, placing them on her cheeks. When she lets go, they flop back onto his lap, and she lifts them again. His lips are parted and she can see a wink of teeth. His eyes are closed, his breathing rhythmic and deep. She brings her face up close so that the room is filled with her father's regular, heartbreaking features. Her small, strong hands are pressed to his chest. She rests her forehead on his, wanting to get inside. She inhales the smell of his neck deeply and squirms a little; his knee between her legs feels solid and warm. The living room is quiet. In the entire world there is only Pearl and her father. Her mother laid a fire before she went out; taking ages, leaving instructions, dropping things, then slamming the door and coming back. Now Pearl listens to the sounds coming from the grate as the flames lick each other and purr. From the place pressed against her father's knee she feels a rippling sensation move through her body, as if a delicate, frilled mushroom were expanding, elongating, filling her up. She exhales slowly. She mustn't disturb him. He would push her off with his beautiful hands if he woke up.

Pram

Pearl is playing with worms in the front garden. Just where the earth is semi-solid and often splashed with rainwater is the perfect place for them. Pearl loves the wriggly, neat casts they leave behind. Especially she loves the way the worms clump together and make themselves into glistening, slow-moving balls. She gets lost in the task of unknotting them. When they are freed, the worms are usually kinky, and she works each one between her palms until it relaxes. Then she lays them out on the smooth mud. Today, in the middle of the lawn there is a huge black pram. Pearl has ignored the snuffling sounds coming from under the white blanket, and the tasselled corner that droops enticingly over the pram's lacquered side. Her worms are neatly arranged in rows. Now she is drawn to the pram with its moving cover. The hood is up and the inside seems filled with light. She can see a tiny patch of pink cheek and a scribble of hair. She leans in and inhales the smell of baby flesh and warm plastic. Suddenly she feels huge and dirty, her knees and hands caked with mud. Pearl climbs up onto a wheel and pushes herself in beside the baby. Her legs are too long so she bends them to fit. Her head is crushed inside the hood. She breathes quietly, and with her shoulder presses hard on the warm little body beside her. She smells his milky breath, looking at how her muddy shoes have spoilt the white blanket. The hood's lacy edging frames the porch. Pearl settles herself more comfortably, thinking about her worms nicely lying in their rows, and waits for the front door to open.



**Stream**

The weeping willow Pearl is riding dips its neck into a clear, brown stream. Sssshhhh, she whispers, as she pats the bucking trunk and grips with her thighs. Above her, the willow tosses its shaggy arms. Slim, fish-shaped leaves fall past Pearl and plop into the stream. She dangles over to watch and inhales as the slivers of green swim away; the stream's breath smells of bright weeds, frogspawn, lichened pebbles. The water is a dazzling drink. Circular, swirling eyes come and go on its surface. Underneath, worm-thin plants all reach forwards, like hair in the wind. Pearl would love to be a stickleback, or a newt, and have the stream as her home. She climbs out of the tree and joins the tall fern-crowds running down to see the water. As she slips through they slap her with gentle, lemony hands, streaking her with juice. Pearl's shorts and pink sun-top all feel so stupid. She wades into the water, her sandals growing heavy, and waits for the stream to settle. Insects are ticking in the undergrowth. Kingcups glow amongst the fleshy plants along the water's margin. Pearl lies down in a smooth, shallow pool. Her hair entwines with the waving plants, her skin turns to liquid, her open eyes are just-born jewels. She can feel her brown limbs dissolving. Sunlight falls in bars and spots through the trees. As the lovely water laps her ears and throat, moves inside her shorts, slips across her fragile ribs, Pearl grins, thinking she hears laughter, and raises her arms to the just-glimpsed sky. These are some of the reasons she comes to the woods.

The Kerb

The ice-cream van has just driven out of the street; its tatty, fading tune makes Pearl feel bereft. She loves to stand by the juddering flank of the van and smell the petrol and vanilla it exhales. The smiling man made a towering cream cone for someone else, sprinkling it with coloured specks, squirting scarlet sauce from his old plastic bottle. Pearl wasn't tempted. Alone, she sits on the kerb and licks an apple ice-lolly. The dust in the gutter is sour and hot, and Pearl sees there is a beetle pulling a dead leaf through it. She picks him up and flings him onto the grass. While he sails through the air Pearl sees his jaws are still clamped to the leaf; it makes her want to smile. But still, it's samey, she thinks, how nothing ever happens in her street, and she sucks her lolly so powerfully the colour fades to ice. She drops a chunk inside her sundress, and feels it slither down to her belly button. Then Pearl senses an odd acceleration in the air. Her head feels as if someone has slipped a tight cap on it. Everything becomes empty and glowing, the sun obscured by mist. Pearl feels excited. She's stared at the sky so hard it seems bright pink, and the outlines of the garden hedges are black and twitching. She begins to laugh as the hairs on her arms rise. Heavy, warm raindrops splat like flicked spoonfuls of soup on Pearl's upturned face and bare shoulders. Lightning cracks above the rooftops, revealing the stunning light from a more interesting world behind the sky. Pearl drops her lolly in the dust, sits on the kerb and holds up her palms while racing clouds are reflected in her huge eyes.

## Perfume

Pearl has been crouched in her cupboard. It smells of books and Plasticine, drying paintbrushes and the old wool kilt she hid long ago. As she sits cross-legged, Pearl can smell, amongst all these things, her own warm self. She puts her fingers inside her pants and dips them into the dense scalloped folds between her legs. Then she pulls her fingers out. Here is my smell, she thinks. I'm like the smashed roots of bluebells. She sniffs deeply. And the soft insides of baby hazelnuts. Then she crawls out of the cupboard and goes to her parents' room. On her mother's dressing table there are bottles and pots Pearl has never touched before. The sun can't get into this room; it's semi-dark even now, although Pearl knows it's the morning. She sits on the stool and looks at all her mother's things, then picks up a bottle and undoes the lid. It smells like her mother, and Pearl sneezes three times, her head nodding with each sneeze. She sniffs the tubes of scarlet lipstick, and the hairbrush. Even the cotton-wool balls in their glass jar smell the same. When she slides open the slim middle drawer, powdery air puffs up and makes her gag. She rummages amongst the silk fragments and lace underwear for a moment, then snatches her fingers away. In the tilted mirror she seems almost transparent. Pearl unfurls a lipstick and draws bold, red circles around her eyes and mouth. Then she makes faces in the mirror, her single, springy curl bobbing like a tiny, gilded horn. The white-covered bed stretches out, its edges crisp as a slab of stone. I love my own smell of bluebells and nuts, she thinks, crossing her eyes and making kissing sounds at her reflection.

## Playing on the Stairs

Her parents are very firm about the stairs. How Pearl should hold the banister, place each foot just so, and absolutely no running. Pearl always listens to her parents. They're grown-ups, after all. She likes to sit on the sixth step and look up and down. She thinks about the stairs a lot; how they are not a room, but inside a house. And the stairwell shoots away, almost to the roof. Pearl plays with her brother on the landing. He isn't crawling yet. She's pulled him, tangled in a wisp of blanket, out of his cot and laid him on the edge of the top step. She uncovers his head and tells him that from now on, secretly, he will be called The Blob. Then she wraps him up again. Her mother is in the garden hanging out washing. From the sixth stair Pearl waits to see what will happen next. The Blob is cocooned in his shawl. He wobbles above her, then flops down onto the first step and bounces on its edge. Down he comes, one, two, three. By the time he hits four he's turned over. On the fifth step he falls onto his face and screams. The sound punches Pearl's ears and streaks jaggedly all around the stairwell. She lunges at the jerking bundle, clutches him tightly, stomps up to the room they share, then heaves him over the rail of his pale blue cot. He stops crying and begins to make an annoying, hiccupy sound. Pearl can see blood in his nostril, and the lashes of his screwed-up eyes are like fragments of black lace. She strokes his hot head for a second, then quietly shuts the bedroom door, creeps out of the house and goes to the woods.



Garden

Pearl has been busy with her tea set under the tall privet hedge that borders the back garden. Cream tapers of crumbly blossom poke out from the leaves, filling the air with a smell of wee and warm fudge. Under the hedge the shade flickers and buzzes. Pearl kneads some cakes out of damp mud, decorating them with insects she has caught. Some of the insects wriggle, so she presses them into the cakes until they lie quietly. From the kitchen Pearl can hear women's voices, and a radio playing. There is the sharp sound of laughter occasionally. She crouches, perfectly still, and watches as a girl steps out into the sunlight, crosses the lawn and walks close to the hedge. Just as she's about to go past, Pearl shoots out her hand, grabs the girl's bare ankle and yanks her down. Ouch, the girl says, on her knees, and acts as if she's about to cry. She's pale, with a sparse, floppy fringe and teeth you notice. Pearl pulls her into the den she's made. You're new, Pearl states. They look at the mud cakes. What are those? the girl asks. Yum, Pearl says. Eat one. She encloses the girl's pliant wrist with both hands and administers a Chinese burn. Eat one, she says, then I'll stop. Are those insects? the girl asks. Pearl goes on twisting. The girl bites into a cake. Her eyes run and snot seeps onto her upper lip. Pearl can hear crunching. The girl swallows, her big teeth muddy. Now you can get lost, Pearl says. But I want to stay, the girl whispers. Pearl expected this. Name? she asks. I'm Fee, the girl answers, settling comfortably, her limp wrist still lying in Pearl's brown hands. Now will you have me as your friend?

**Potty**

Strands of sun slant in through the kitchen window, drying the wooden draining board again. Already the hours feel old and exhausted. It's been cleaning day, and the house is filled with that lonely atmosphere of bleach and polish throughout. There is nowhere in the entire place she can go and be safe. Even the garden is unappealing; too open and bright, too raw and flat for her to play in. Pearl has sunburnt shoulders, the skin lifting off in airy petals she likes to eat. She drops her head as she stands in the doorway, feeling her cool cheek as it rests on the ragged skin, watching as their mother lowers her brother onto his potty. From the kitchen comes a beige-and-green cooking smell Pearl doesn't like, something she will be expected to eat later. The smell makes her feel as if she'd like to crumple today up and chuck it out, somewhere no one will ever think of looking. This feeling weakens her legs so they fold, and she plonks down on the cool tiles. The Blob is only wearing a skimpy vest. His fat bottom over-spills the potty rim. Both pink circles are distorted in the shining tiles. He is happily munching, fists holding a chocolate biscuit, his face smeared with melted brown goo. He has knobbly wet bits slicked in his hair and crusting his eyebrows. Even though Pearl knows it is only chocolate, her mouth fills with salty saliva and she begins to heave. She moves onto her hands and knees. Looking at her brother's toes, she sees the brown stuff is also on his feet and elbows. Pearl vomits all over her mother's slippery vermilion tiles.

Bunny

Pearl does a certain thing with her soft, pink toy rabbit. He's bald in places and has yellow buttons for eyes, and the insides of his floppy ears are made from a shiny fabric she likes to rub between her thumb and fingers. When Pearl was very little she discovered that if she pushed her rabbit up in the nook between her legs and squeezed him tight, then a lovely, lonely, secret feeling flooded from him into her, taking her breath away. Most people think how cute it is, the way Pearl will not be parted from her toy. No one knows about his special powers. Her father reads a story every night, mostly about good girls with straight fringes and striped dresses who help their mothers and are kind to pets, but at the moment they are reading *The Jungle Book*. Pearl thinks she could be the brother of Mowgli. That way, he would never pine to go back to the boring man-village; he'd have a person with him in the jungle whenever one was needed. The radiator clicks warmly and the curtains hang in even folds as she lies on the pillow, watching her father's mouth telling her about the wolf clan and the lonely hill they use as their home. His hands are holding the book in a way Pearl loves, and she is holding her pink bunny so he can follow things easily; his ears point upwards and his yellow buttons look over the top of the blanket. Then Pearl has an idea. She pulls her rabbit out and gives him to her father, who absent-mindedly holds him in his open palm as he reads. Pearl looks into the yellow buttons of her rabbit sitting there on her father's hand and soon she feels the familiar, luscious quiver her bunny always gives her.

**Snow will fall**

Pearl's father promises snow. She has absolute faith, but still the snow is reluctant. In the shed they pull down the sleigh with its metal runners, Pearl passes the oil and a rag for him to rub each curved, rusting length. Then they go out into the blasted winter garden and hold hands as he sniffs the air. Well, he says, and sniffs again. Pearl doesn't interrupt. Yes, he says, I think very soon, and he suddenly tightens his grip on her gloved hand. It feels like an electric shock leaping up Pearl's arm, he is so strong. Which day, Daddy? she asks. This weekend definitely, he says, and shocks her one more time. On Saturday the sky is porridge-coloured. Pearl imagines the blobs of snow teeming against each other as they get ready. She doesn't want to eat any lunch, even though her mother has made toast soldiers. The brown dotted egg smells funny. A banana has been waiting, curved around half her plate. She gags pointedly on it until her mother gives up and snatches it out of her slack fist. Then she goes to the park and settles herself on a swing. Pearl keeps her eyes shut. She wants to feel the snow first. She sits until her nose tip is wet and her feet are freezing. As the hours go by her hands in their woollen gloves meld to the swing chains. It begins to get dark. Pearl is pale, almost swooning with cold and hunger. The lamp lights come on but Pearl doesn't see them. Then, softly, softly, snowflakes touch her lips and eyelids and she leaps off the swing. Pearl twirls in the shifting, snow-bedazzled park until her red hat flies away and she falls down.



**Bad**

There's nothing to do. Pearl's friend Fee has gone on holiday. For weeks before she went, Pearl wouldn't speak to her. They still met every day of course. At first, Fee tried to explain about the place they always went for their holidays; about the sea, and camping, but Pearl wouldn't listen. On the evening before Fee left they were under the privet hedge in Pearl's garden. But why? Fee kept on asking. Why won't you speak, my love? Pearl sat cross-legged, picking a scab on her knee, her face set like a fierce, rosy mask. Fee tried to hold Pearl's hand. I can't help it, my parents are in charge, you know that, she told Pearl. They both watched blood ooze out from under the ripped scab. Pearl was silent. She pulled in her cheeks and made her lips like a cartoon fish. As Fee sobbed, Pearl put her own squished-up mouth on the wet, broken scab and sucked. Then she screamed at Fee with bloody lips and punched her in the stomach. Now Pearl looks out of her bedroom window at the children playing in the street, and rests her middle on the windowsill tiles. She can feel a chilly pulse in her belly that comes from her navel. The pulse seems to rise and sit in the tubes of her ears and the cave of her mouth. It's a wrong, blush-making feeling, but Pearl stays pressed against the sill, thinking of Fee, the way she'd looked after the punch, struggling to close her lips over her sticky-out front teeth. Pearl has known about this pulsing feeling and the windowsill for a long time, but she hated it so much she only did it once, till now. She is going to do it every day, until her best friend Fee comes back.

Scissors

Pearl is making a costume for the doll she was given as a birthday gift. Already the doll's got a blind eye, a missing hand and a severe haircut. Mostly it lies, splay-legged, under the bed. Pearl's found her mother's sharp scissors and is cutting an old jumper, but it won't keep still. She's thrown by how hopeless she is; even her mother snips through all sorts of things, all the time, without any trouble. Pearl begins to get more energetic. The Blob holds onto her armchair, watching her fight with the snarled-up wool. Bloody! she shouts, throwing the mess down and making him flinch. Do you see this stupid doll? she asks him as he loses his balance and sits down on the floor. I didn't want it. She stands over him and tells him that no one ever asks her what she wants. In fact, no one asks me anything, she says. The Blob sucks his thumb and plays with a carpet tuft. Then he wants to get on the chair so Pearl bunks him up. Immediately he starts to scream. She grabs him. Blood is blooming on her dress, leaking from his leg. Pearl slaps her hand over his mouth so violently he stops, and realises that a point of the scissors has gouged a lump of flesh from his bare thigh. She snatches bits of jumper, pressing, and looks around for something better. When she turns back the jumper is wet and scarlet. Her brother gulps, sucking his thumb, his eyes fixed on hers. Make a sound and you're dead, she says, and tucks him into the chair, covering him with a pile of material. Then she listens at the door. Now she is going to creep out and hide the scissors in the woods, then, maybe, later, come back home.