

Jack Crosses the Bridge

A Fairy Tale by Richard Reeve

(images: frog, bridge, feather, path in the forest, pear eaten on tree, cloven foot, fox, white cow, broken egg)

Once upon a time, on a bright summer's day, Jack was playing down by the stream that ran behind the cottage where he lived with his grandmother. All summer long he'd escape her harsh words of reproach by spending his days daydreaming along the banks of the stream. All day, that is, only after finishing his many chores which filled the better part of each morning. This day, after tossing stones for awhile and enjoying watching the patterns of the ripples erase on the surface of the stream, Jack began drifting sticks out onto the water as if they were little ships heading out to sea on a great voyage.

Suddenly Jack was surprised to hear a croaking voice call out his name, "Now Jack, why don't you take a real adventure instead of dreaming of one." And looking down Jack found a large frog standing upright on his two legs as if he were a little human.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Jack, "How did you learn to talk?"

"A better question, from where I stand, is how did you learn to listen, my boy. But that's for another day. What say you? Ready to get your head out of the clouds and find a real adventure all your own?" asked the frog.

“Why, I’d love to,” said Jack, “but how would I ever manage?”

“Oh, that’s not so hard,” answered the frog. “You’ll just need to see where the path leads. That is really all there is to it.”

“What path?” asked Jack.

“Why it looks like yours heads right across that bridge from what I can tell.” said the frog, pointing around Jack’s leg.

“Bridge?” questioned Jack, “why...” But turning Jack was speechless, as only a stones throw upstream there now stood an arching bridge that crossed over the stream to the forest that grew right up to the edge of the far bank. Now Jack knew no such bridge had ever been in that spot before. In fact, in all his walks up and down the stream, he had never once come upon a bridge, not even a fallen tree.

“But how can that be?” asked Jack.

“You’re a bit too interested in figuring out the *how* my boy. Enough questions. Now off with you.” And with that the frog dove into the water and disappeared.

Jack spent some time waiting for the frog to surface that he might ask more questions, but as the seconds ticked on, it became clear that the frog had no intention of showing himself. So Jack walked slowly over to the bridge and tapped it with his foot, then placed one foot onto its

first plank, checking the sturdiness. It seemed sturdy enough so he cautiously began to climb the arching incline out over the stream and then found himself walking down the other side.

As Jack stepped off of the bridge onto a dirt path leading into the forest, a dark cloud slipped in front of the sun, making the already dark forest seem even darker. After turning around and considering going back, Jack chastised himself.

“So many afternoons I’ve spent wishing only for a real adventure, and now that one is here, I’m ready to run away like a coward.” So turning, Jack walked briskly down the path into the dark forest, his jaw clenched.

Along the path, he spotted a blue feather, and at first he walked past it as his was anticipating what he might find. He few steps on the thought struck him, “why, I’ve found a blue feather!” so he turned and retrieved the feather before continuing on his way.

After quite some time the winding path came to small cottage and at once Jack noticed a curious thing, a pear tree with many of the pears eaten, but not picked. “What kind of place is this?” thought Jack.

As the path ran right up to the door of the cottage Jack walked up onto the porch and knocked. A thin old man with dark eyes wearing a long black robe opened the door and said nothing, but returned into the main room of the cottage.

Jack didn't like the looks of the man one bit, but screwing up his courage, he called out, "Sir, I believe my path brings me right up to your door."

The man turned in a flash of anger, one hairy leg with a cloven foot slipping out of the black robe. He hissed "Why yes. It. Does. You good for nothing fool, and just my luck. Now turn and note, the path that brings you to me has disappeared. So you're one of the few lucky ones that found the feather. so try as I might, I can never sink my teeth into. Go find your path, just go ahead and try. Be off with you." The man then charged Jack's way and slammed the door in his face.

Jack jumped back off the porch, and turned to run from the scary man, but it was just as the man had said. The path he came on had disappeared. The cottage was now surrounded by trees with no sign of a path in any direction. Jack froze, not knowing where to turn. Then off to his left, Jack caught a glimpse of a red flash. Immediately he felt he must head in that direction. When he arrived at the tree where he saw the red streak he found nothing, but then he then saw another red flash, but this time the animal was running off in the distance to his right. Again Jack headed off toward it. This game of chase and dodge continued for what seemed like hours with Jack zig zagging all over the forest, continually changing his direction, yet never getting any closer to long red tail that teased him onwards. Just as his fatigue began to get the best of him, Jack began to hear a soft song. The fox that had been guiding him stepped forth and walked up to the edge of a clearing where it sat down quietly, its front legs extending into the glowing opening amidst the dark forest.

Jack crawled up next to the fox and looked with awe into the clearing before him. There sat a huge white cow with golden letters from a language he had never seen before radiating on her forehead. And the songs that he heard from the forest was rising from the grass all about the clearing. When Jack looked close, to his surprise he saw humans the size of ants, all going about their business, signing their joyous song as they surrounded and seemingly took care of the white cow in the clearing.

“So, this is what I’ve brought you to see, and though it will be many years boy before it makes any sense, hold tight to what presents itself to you here,” said the Fox.

“But who is she” Jack asked the Fox.

“Certainly, you know you know, boy,” the fox replied.

The cow turned its gaze upon Jack and without speaking, seemingly spoke in his mind “Come to me boy.”

Jack slowly stood up and began to walk toward the white cow that was beckoning him, feeling he should offer her something, and then remembering the feather in his hand he held it out before him. With each step his vision clouded until an enveloping whiteness surrounded him, and the warmth in his body increased into a fever. Disoriented, Jack fell into the grass.

And his fall felt like a continuing somersault into an ever-tightening space, till he ended up jammed into a frightfully tight enclosure, its smooth rounded walls holding his body tight, his

knees tucked up under his chin. With his heel, Jack began to kick little kicks attempting to break out. Then with his elbows he banged and banged, until finally cracking the shell of the egg that held him, Jack awoke in his bed from his dream, sweating and gasping for air.