



THE BLESSINGS OF UNCERTAINTY

When I was a kid, I heard about my imagination constantly from adults—"What an imagination you have!" "Did that all happen in your imagination?" "Don't worry. That's just your imagination." Sometimes these were meant as compliments. Sometimes they clearly were not. "Are you daydreaming again?" "Pay attention!" "You can't live in your imagination, you know." "Wake up, kiddo." I didn't call it an imagination, and I wasn't sure I liked when others did. I spent about 90 percent of my time in this fantastical place. It was my whole world, but whenever I talked to anyone about the great wide universe in which I was living, they would take it from me, make it smaller, and file it under the heading "imagination." And so, with time, I talked about it less.

I invented a game and I played it by myself, off and on, for years. It seems crazy to call it a game, really. The whole forest, which began at our back door and stretched to Hawaii, as far as I knew, was my playground. And I populated it with a fantastical array of characters, both friendly and dangerous. I left acorn-heads as clues, and buried plastic vending-machine-jewelry in dead stumps as offerings. When the wind blew through and dropped a shower of pine needles over my hidden camp, that was a portent of danger. In winter, witches left a path of blood-red grape leaves over the snow for me to chase after them. But I didn't like to think of this as my game, my invention. I preferred to believe that this world had always existed, that those wily fairy-eyes had always peeked out from under the tree stumps, and I was only lucky to have been the one to notice them.



It never occurred to me that adulthood wouldn't bring certainty.

From my favorite bluff, I could see over the hilltops for miles, and my child's mind believed that view to be the span of the continent. In the far distance, a vaguely defined copse of trees stood apart and above the others, and those were Californian palm trees. It wasn't until I was embarrassingly old—maybe 11 or 12—that I asked one of my parents and they explained that those trees were pine, like all the others, and only perhaps 10 miles away. I remember that moment clearly, the moment when I was corrected, because it was one of the first times I was conscious of the pleasure of letting go of reality. I stood and looked out over the hills and I let myself believe 100% that I was looking into that eternal, tropical distance I'd always imagined, and at the next moment I knew 100% that I was wrong. And then I went back. And forth. Like sliding between different frames of the same image. Each displaced the other entirely, and each felt equally real.

That tendency to let my mind make and unmake the world around me has surfaced again and again over the years, especially in the months after my father died. I would find myself shifting in and out of the knowledge that he was gone. It wasn't that I was wishing he were alive, (though that was true as well.) It was that I could make myself know he was. He was only in the other room, or just outside the door, or on a trip somewhere. And then, after awhile, I would let reality crash back through. And it would break over me so devastatingly hard that I would let myself shift back again.

I enabled this shaky grasp on the world with my constant reading. Memories of my

early childhood are acted out among three primary sets—home and the forest around it, school, and the public library. The public library was my preferred babysitter. I would beg to be dropped off there while my parents ran errands, or visited their friends, or for whole long stretches of summer days while they were working. The librarians must have been concerned the first few times, to have this little blond girl roaming the stacks by herself, but, over time, it seemed they would forget I was there. I can remember startling the head librarian more than once when I appeared, peeking over the front desk, with a stack of books to check out.

The children's section was probably a lot smaller than I remember, but it offered a number of hidden corners, where I could sprawl out on the scratchy orange carpet and devour a series of books—all the Nancy Drew mysteries over a week, then the Boxcar Kids, the Babysitter's Club, the Bobbsey Twins.

Multiple volumes of ghost stories and simplified novelizations of history—the Titanic, the British Monarchy, the Salem Witchcraft Trials.

It was around the time that I read about the Witchcraft Trials that I figured out the weakness of our library's layout. I had pretty well exhausted all the interesting books in the children's area, but the next logical step—Young Adult—was directly in front of the librarian's desk, and blocked off by a thick rope to anyone under the age of 13. The couple of times I wandered near that section, I was immediately shooed away. I went back to the children's section, frustrated, for a couple days, but then I realized—while I couldn't manage to reach the Young Adult books, the Adult stacks, inexplicably, were open to anyone and mostly blocked from the librarian's view. I walked anxiously to the card catalog and wrote down the information I needed. Then, while no one was looking, I darted into the tall shelves.

And that was how I went straight from reading a children's book about Witchcraft trials to reading Ann Rice.

I'll never forget the moment of exhilaration, drunk on forbidden Adult-only books, when it occurred to me that all the things I believed were possible—Witches, ghosts, reincarnation, time travel—were all present in the Adult stacks too. I was lying on the floor with books all around me. I looked up, out the tall window, at the street lights flickering on, and I reasoned with myself: surely adulthood means knowing what's real and what isn't. So either (1) I'm right about magic existing, and when I'm an adult I'll find out for sure, or (2) I'm wrong, and (this was a painful thought,) someday I won't believe in any of this stuff anymore. The adults might lie to me, if I asked them, because I was still a kid, but one day the matter would be settled, if I just waited for it.

It never occurred to me that adulthood wouldn't bring certainty.

A few months ago, my husband Jim and I stayed the night at an old railroad hotel in Northern Kansas. We've driven over there a few times since we've lived on the plains, because it's old and creaky and haunted, supposedly, and we both enjoy old, creaky, haunted things. This most recent time, at breakfast, we finally met the owner. He stopped and chatted a bit about the hotel, the restoration process, the small town. He mentioned that a few ghosthunters had come to the hotel recently and had discovered a number of "presences" on the upper floors. He chuckled at my obvious interest in what they'd found, and asked, would I like to meet one of the ghosts?

I agreed warily. I'm far more likely to believe in ghostly presences than I am to trust in humans, and so I stood unhappily where he told me to stand, and followed his instructions. The trick involved him touching above my eyelids in a rhythm, while I closed and opened my eyes. I was uncomfortable and growing less fond of this guy by the minute, and still—when I felt the extra "tap" on my forehead, about three inches from where I believed his fingers to be, I experienced maybe half a second of pure excitement and elation. Was that the ghost?! Then I opened my eyes and saw his gloating smile, and Jim's bemused face beside him, and my happiness sank into a perplexed frustration. "How did you do that?" I demanded, until finally the owner showed me the trick. It was so simple. A kid would've known what was happening. And I felt like a fool over that half-second of gullible joy. I had wanted this to be that moment of certainty. The veil drawn back to reveal—ta da!--that I was right all along. And so I had let myself be tricked.

The worry that washed over me while I watched the trick explained—the worry that haunts me, now that growing older hasn't proven itself the key to unlocking the truth—is

that life will solve no mysteries at all. I fear that my imagination was only ever just that—a child’s tool for explaining a large, frightening world. That nothing supernatural will ever reveal itself to me, that no map will ever lead me to someplace hitherto undiscovered. That the longing for deeper answers will not prove qualification enough for finding them. And that death will come, finally, and that none of my consciousness will survive to understand what happens next.

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Other people seem comfortable with this likelihood. Smarter people than I. Saner people. Probably these people understood not to look to fictional worlds for promises about this one. They didn’t let themselves get lost, so often, in that boundary between plausible realities.

I did this to myself. Too many years spent inside one novel and then the next. Too many days spent roaming the forest with glitter on my face and leaves in my hair. I invested so much time in other universes that I just can’t summon the inclination to swim back to reality—or “reality,” as the case may be.

In some ways, I could call it a blessing that adulthood, with all its other disillusion, hasn’t yet rid me of my hopes for receiving hidden knowledge. As long as there is uncertainty, and brief glimpses of evidence to support me—quantum theory and near-death experiences, millions of ghost stories and memories of reincarnation—there is a reason to hope I’m right. I never thought I’d be someone who held her beliefs only because they are comforting, whether or not they stand up to a rigorous logical examination, but as I get older, I feel more sympathy with those who do. Who could prove to me that the material world is the sum total of what’s real? Let them prove it to somebody else. Honestly, I’d rather not know.



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