the silver lining

by rushie

Summary

Alice returns to Wonderland years later to find it a much darker place than she remembered. It's as if a cloud has fallen over the once happy land. But every cloud has its silver lining, and Alice is about to find hers.

Notes

author's note: usual disclaimers apply: I own neither Alice in Wonderland nor its characters. I started this story ages ago, and I'm pretty sure it's been far too long since I've even thought about touching it. therefore, I'm posting it here, with you lovely people, and if this preface and chapter one get enough of a positive response, perhaps that might just spur me on to continue.
Wonderland had changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Everyone had suspected it would happen—after all, it was the nature of things in the Other World, to go on and grow up and all of that other rubbish that they associated with life—but no one had known just how soon it would happen. Time moved much slower in Wonderland—or perhaps it didn't move at all, and the inhabitants were trapped in an endless cycle of days that left them quite the same as they had been, or perhaps that was just how Alice's mind kept them—and things had picked up with a rapidity that no one had foreseen. It would appear time moved much faster in the Other World than it did in the imaginary land. But the fact of the matter was that the state of things that had been when Alice first ventured into her little sanctuary were not nearly the same as they were now.

Things had become darker, almost sinister, changing the inhabitants of Wonderland with it. Alice's mind, no longer the mind of a child, had begun to change, and her little world of her own had changed steadily with it. Whatever the girl's thoughts were, or whatever emotions she had been repressing—all of the bitterness and the hate, all of the heavy feelings she kept inside—seemed to have been transported to the magical world where she had once visited, turning it dark and ugly. It was a horrifying place to be, on the whole, and it was becoming steadily more so with every second that passed.

The Queen of Hearts had taken over, and her reign was supremely terrible. The Tweedles, once such amiable—if not misleading—brothers, had fallen under her spell, turning them into horrible, slinking monsters. They appeared vastly different, more sinister than ever before, and their deeds were horrendous. They had become rapists, murderers, and their tales and anecdotes were not told to amuse anymore so much as they were told to frighten. Others, too, were facing the Queen's wrath, particularly those who had refused to accept her rule. The Caterpillar was in grave danger, and there were new reports of someone disappearing every day. No doubt the Queen had them locked away in her dungeon—unless, of course, she had already rolled their heads across the stone; she had always been fond of beheading.

The imprisoned were treated terribly, and the word passing around was that the torture was most severe, ghastly punishments inflicted with no concern or remorse. There were only a few who had not converted and managed to keep themselves out of the Queen's castle. The Cheshire Cat, for one, had managed this feat, but most attributed that to the simple fact that the Queen could not catch him; he was a slippery feline, slinking just out of reach, and he was impossible to catch if he did not want to be caught. The March Hare and the Mad Hatter were safe, if only because they had claimed a sort of neutrality, although they secretly harbored thoughts of rebellion, wishing desperately that something—anything—could turn their home back to the place it had once been. The Dormouse had been taken away, kicking and screaming, and they wondered if they, for all their claims of neutrality, would be next.

The wood leading to the March Hare's cottage was dismal and dark. The trees pressed in on the traveler, and the Mad Hatter found himself rushing down the path every day as he headed over for tea, frightened of what could be lurking in the wood—the Bandersnatch or perhaps the Jubjub Bird. There had recently been horrific, guttural sounds issuing from the forest as well, leaving the haberdasher to wonder if there was a Jabberwock loose. He would not have put it past the Queen, and he practically ran helter-skelter to the gate of the March Hare every day before plunking himself down at his customary spot at the table to drink his favorite cup of tea and to read the morning paper.
The paper, of course, would have one believe that things were all smiles and sunshine, and it disgusted him to the degree that he would put it away unfinished before long. They were a rather subdued party on occasions, which they attributed to the loss of the Dormouse, something they had not quite foreseen. And the changes of Wonderland had taken effect even at the seemingly boisterous residence of the Hare.

While the Hare's cottage remained as it had always—it seemed that only _living_ things were affected by this change—the Hare himself was changed. He was, perhaps, slightly darker in fur color, and there was a depravity in his eyes that no amount of tea could quell. He twitched occasionally for no apparent reason, and his madness seemed to have been intensified, leaving his moods unpredictable—more so even than his companion's, whose moods had always been erratic at best. The Hatter himself looked strange. When Alice had first visited, he had appeared...older, since anything to a child over their own age was _old_. But now he appeared for all the world to be a young man in his mid- to late-twenties. His hair, however, was still an obstinate shade of white—the Mercury, of course—and his nose was still perhaps rather larger than customary. There was a shrewdness about his face that perhaps had not been there before, but he altogether remained quite the same as he had before. His moods were still rather volatile, and he occasionally needed to be snapped out of fits of anger that came from nowhere, and he still cherished the hat he had perched upon his head as if his very lifeblood ran through it. Still, he could not pretend that nothing had happened, and the very subject of the horrible goings-on was the object of discussion at breakfast when their young lady friend appeared at the gate.

"The Cheshire Cat, he reckons no one can fix this," the Hare said in tones of great anxiety, accidentally buttering his hand instead of his biscuit. "He—he thinks it will all have gone to _her_ before the end."

"There is," began the Hatter behind his paper, twitching it irritably to move on to the next page, "someone who can help us." He sighed heavily, folding up his paper and putting it down out of sheer disgust. "Alas, she has not been seen in these parts for nigh over..."

He stopped, trailing off mid-thought, which was not altogether uncommon. It was for this reason that the Hare did not comment on it, merely plowed on with a response as if the Hatter had finished his thought. When his friend gave no response at all, however, he looked up to see the white-haired fellow staring at something in the general direction of the garden gate, and the Hare swiveled, sloshing tea out of his cup, to see what the Hatter was staring at. Immediately, he jumped, a strangled cry issuing from his throat, but whether it was from the sight of Alice standing beyond the gate or the great quantity of scalding tea he had spilled over himself was difficult to say. The Hatter, for his part, behaved a tad more gracefully.

He leaped up and half ran over, resulting in a rather comical sight as he attempted to decide what to do mid-stride. When he had finally drawn himself level with the girl in question—and he knew immediately who she was, despite the change the years had done to her face (she had seemed to grow older as he had grown younger), he would have recognized her anywhere. For a moment, however, he feared he was witnessing an illusion, and he reached out, looking almost dreamlike, and touched the tip of her nose with his finger. "Ah!" he cried, triumphant. "She is real! You are real!" he added to the "she" herself, beside himself. "Oh, _frabjous day_!" he crowed, half-leaping into the air and turning to look at the Hare. "'Twould seem, my friend, that my precognitive powers are not as lacking as you assumed! I do believe you owe me a shilling!"
Curiosity does, no less than devotion, pilgrims make. — Abraham Cowley

A picnic, thought Alice, was only entertaining when the party included more than one person. As it were, however, Alice's party consisted only of herself and the few ants that had crawled lazily over her blanket in the vain hopes of reaching the basket of food she had sitting beside her. It was a pleasantly breezy summer afternoon, and Alice watched the other picnickers sitting on their blankets and eating their lunches, talking and chattering, their laughter occasionally drifting over to where Alice sat by her lonesome. There were other couples taking a turn around the grassy area, and they seemed to move almost in stop-motion from the distance at which the young woman sat. The movements she could discern were staccato and jerky, as if they were marionettes used by an amateur puppet master.

Of course, Alice knew this was not the case; the park was perfectly innocuous and boring, just as a park should be. There were no purple trees or oversized mushrooms. No hookah-smoking caterpillars telling her what to do. There were no striped cats dangling off of tree limbs, their eerily wide grins lingering seconds behind them to frighten the wary traveler. The roses on the bushes were red because they had been *planted* as such, not painted, and Alice was quite certain that the tarts inside of her basket had *not* been stolen.

It had taken her a bit of time to readjust to the proper way of life outside of the realm of fantasy and imagination she had become so accustomed to daydreaming about as a child. Once she grew older, however, she had found that it was easier to join in her sisters' conversations about the latest fashions of the time, and she had even gone so far as to help her second-oldest sister prepare for her wedding, which had taken place not two months previously. They had retired to a quaint home in the country, and Alice's parents had gone to visit. Alice, who had decided not to go (it would have, after all, been a terrible imposition upon her sister and brother-in-law, for they had only just enough room for four people, and Alice would make five, leaving the place quite overcrowded), had decided to spend the nice afternoon she had to herself having a pleasant picnic. Unfortunately, she had not realized that it would be quite so *boring* without other people.

There were, of course, people she recognized in the area, but those that she talked to were engaged in various activities of their own: her mother's friend, Madame Devereaux, was chasing her new puppy about while trying to keep her parasol firmly above her head; her father's business partner, Mister Hill, seemed to be poring over some sort of financial transactions, and she didn't dare disturb him (she had learned from experience that it was best to leave people alone when they did things regarding money); and her acquaintance Eliza was taking a stroll with a young man Alice thought was named Frugal or Bugle or something ridiculous, and Alice knew better than to interrupt. Still, no amount of good manners could keep her proper company on such a lovely day, and she sighed, finally reaching over to open the basket beside her and extract a book that she had found in her father's library. It had appeared interesting at first glance, and she settled herself more comfortably on the blanket to begin perusal of the contents.

The novel, she soon discovered, was supremely boring, and she found she had read the same paragraph three times without actually taking in a single word of it. Her mother had talked about the wonderful quality of the book at length, but Alice found it completely vapid and devoid of true emotion. The "adventure" it promised was nothing more exciting and dangerous than Alice pricking
her finger on a needle when she tried to sew. Her mind began to wander, even as she closed the cover of the book over and restored it to the basket, closing the wicker lid over with a definitive thwump before any hopeful ants could invade. Deciding that she would accomplish nothing by continuing to sit here and gaze in dreamlike silence at the pretty but uniform landscape, she gathered her skirts and rose to go home. She hooked the basket over her arm, letting it rest in the crook of her elbow, folded the blanket, and tucked it under her arm before setting off.

As she tread the familiar path back to her home, her mind strayed to the recent events—with both of her sisters married off (the eldest living merely down the street from Alice and her parents and the second-oldest living, as previously mentioned, in the country), Alice was beginning to wonder if it would soon be her time. Surely she felt no attachment to anyone—not, of course, that there was anyone to feel attachment to, not really. There had been a few gentlemen to call, but she had found them supremely uninteresting, and their collective lack of humor had led Alice to wonder if there was some sort of humor-vacuum that was sucking the humor out of every single person that entered her house. Of course, Alice could just be—as her mother had informed her several times—inordinately picky and enormously stubborn, but the girl herself liked to think that she simply wanted to hold out for someone a bit less…detached.

It was not to say, of course, that she thought her sisters had been mistaken—both of them were quite happy with their lives, and Alice was happy for them. It simply seemed that Alice was destined to either drive every young man that came to call away with her occasionally wry sense of humor or that they were destined to drive her away with their constant talk of such utterly uninteresting things—for all the world Alice could not possibly care less about the fruit industry or the shipping business or anything of the sort. Still, her mother was fond of dropping hints that Alice would be "old" before she knew it and that it was best to get the jump on things so one didn't find themselves looking back at their lives and seeing that they had missed out on so much. Alice had learned that it was best to feign deafness on these occasions, and she would often eat her dinner in uncharacteristic silence, taking care not to look at her father lest she lose her resolve and crack a smile, which would surely send her mother into conniptions.

The house was coming into view now, a handsome white structure with black shutters and a large porch. Chairs were usually set up on the porch when someone was home, but Alice's overly cautious mother insisted on bringing the chairs inside when the house was empty, for she was afraid of someone coming by and stealing them. Alice had dared to point out on one occasion that anyone who would steal a chair was probably not in his or her right mind anyway and therefore would not be someone that Alice, her mother, or her father should go chasing after with limbs flailing. Besides, she had reasoned, it was only a chair, and surely simple wooden chairs to set on the porch were not so terribly expensive anyway. After receiving a quelling look from her mother, she had let the argument drop and took pains to avoid saying anything at all whenever her mother's suspicions of thievery were voiced again.

A neighbor, exiting his house, raised a hand in greeting at Alice, who did her best to wave back despite her cumbersome burden. With the pleasantries accomplished, she turned and pushed open the front gate, taking care to make sure it swung shut behind her and latched firmly. She strode calmly up the path and mounted the few steps to the porch, setting down her items to delve for the key in the basket. Once she produced it, she made to put it in the lock and turn it, only to discover that the door was slightly ajar. Alarmed, Alice froze for a fraction of a second, ears straining to hear any sort of sound beyond the door, but there was nothing but the distant chiming of a clock. Her hand gripped the knob tightly, and she prepared to achieve the element of surprise. Steadying herself, she flung open the door and leapt in a rather unladylike fashion into the foyer, only just managing to restrain herself from emitting a triumphant "Aha!"

The foyer was utterly empty, and the young woman stood for a moment, perplexed, before deciding
that she had simply forgotten to properly close the door behind her. She gathered her things off the porch, admonishing herself for her silliness (although a small voice in the back of her mind insisted that she had locked the door because the gesture was so ingrained in her from her mother's constant worrying), and closed the door firmly behind her, turning the latch and making sure she heard it click. The basket she took to the kitchen to unload what she had not eaten—which, on the whole, was not much; she had only taken an apple and some tarts, and the tarts were the only things still in the basket. She set them off to the side and returned with her basket to the sitting room, where she placed the basket and the picnic blanket down on the floor; she would put them away properly later, and she reminded herself to also return the book—which she had set on a small side-table upon entering her house—to the library.

She dropped herself unceremoniously onto a comfortable, powder blue settee, sighing in exhaustion and readying herself for a short doze before she set about her business. Unfortunately, she had not yet had occasion to close her eyes when a curious creaking noise came to her attention, and she sat up again, wide-eyed and frightened. Though she had been quite certain that the house was empty, she was still entertaining thoughts of thieves and bandits, and she caught herself looking over her shoulder, half expecting to see a shadowy figure looming behind her, about to silence her forever. Shaking her head to rid it of these morbid thoughts—which were most likely brought on by reading one too many mystery novels—she turned back to face front to find the source of the mysterious creaking noise. It was, in fact, the rocking chair situated almost directly across from her. The lavender cushion resting comfortably upon the seat was slightly askew, and the chair itself was moving slowly forward and backwards, creaking faintly as it rocked forward. Alice stared at it for a moment, perplexed by this new development, for she knew that rocking chairs did not simply move on their own. They were inanimate objects, and there was no fathomable reason why hers should be rocking of its own accord. Decidedly, the young woman rose to her feet and crossed over to the chair, righting the cushion with a practiced gesture. She paused on her way back to the settee, having heard a plaintive meow from somewhere in the next room.

The cat! she realized, admonishing herself for her own foolishness. Of course! Their cat had often taken to leaping up on the chair when the family was in the sitting room, particularly if Alice was the chair's occupant. But the cat certainly had not been there when Alice had first entered the room, of that she was certain, and she could not comprehend how it could have entered, leapt up on the chair, and leapt down again in the mere matter of seconds that she had not been paying attention. Still, she began to wonder where, exactly, her cat was, and she abandoned her hopes of an afternoon doze and wandered from room to room, peering inside and under things in an effort to find her elusive feline. Eventually, she made her way to the back rooms of the house, and she stopped short upon seeing the back door ajar, much like the front door had been.

It would not, she knew, be the first time that the cat had escaped, and even though Alice knew that there was no conceivable way that her pet could have escaped into the back (The door, after all, had been locked, she was sure of it; and even then, cats certainly could not turn doorknobs!), it was the only explanation she could come up with. The sound she had heard, she recollected, had seemed to come from this portion of the house, and it only stood to reason that it was the cat that had escaped out the open back door. As to how it had opened, Alice was unsure, but she merely assumed that she, in her languorous state, had unlocked it upon her return home and opened it for some air for a moment and had not closed it properly. Of course, the rational part of Alice's brain knew that this was utterly false, but she was determined not to think the worst and therefore overrode any objections her mind might have otherwise had.

There was, after all, a decision to be made.

She could venture out into the back and attempt to find the cat herself, or she could simply wait for it
to return home of its own accord. But Alice was worrisome—a trait she had unfortunately inherited from her mother—as the cat had been the only other occupant of the otherwise empty house, and Alice felt that she would feel utterly alone if even the cat had abandoned her. She did not want to venture out to find it, but she knew she would end up going in the end, and she eventually resolved just to take a turn about the premises and see if she could not recapture her pet. If the animal could not be located in the immediate area, however, then Alice would return home with the hope that it would return before nightfall.

She stepped out onto the back porch with a purposeful air, closing the door firmly behind her and gathering her skirts in one hand to make her way daintily down the steps. The last thing she needed was to go tumbling head over heels to the ground and end up in an unceremonious heap in the dirt. She made it safely down the steps, and she let her skirts go to allow them to spring back into place around her. She smoothed her hands over the front of her skirts before stepping carefully across the lawn, peeking behind the rhododendron bush to see if her cat was hiding back there. But the dirt between the aforementioned bush and the house was devoid of any feline, and Alice continued on her way around the yard, checking behind a tree and parting some ferns. She was just about to give up hope when she heard another meow, louder than before, and she swiveled on the spot just in time to see a tail disappearing behind a hedge.

"Oh!" Alice cried in exasperation, rushing off in a rather unladylike fashion after the tail, the owner of which was nowhere to be found. She gathered her skirts once more, lest she trip and kill herself, and hurried behind the hedge. She found herself on the side of her house, and she spotted the tail disappearing around the corner again—just a quick flash, so she could not discern whether it really was her cat or not or if it was merely a stray wandering about the premises—and hurried onward. She hiked up her skirts (praying, of course, that no one was around to see this appallingly immodest display, however momentary) and hopped over the flower bed, landing rather gracefully on the path, before letting her skirts fall back to a more modest position and hurrying on out the gate, for she had just seen the tail she was following vanishing around the corner and heading down the street.

It was difficult work, Alice decided as she hurried along as best as she could without arousing public suspicion—for it was all very well and good to gambol about in one's house and back yard where one could not be seen, but a public street was quite a different venue—running after a cat that did not wish to be caught. That, of course, was what it seemed, as the only other explanation Alice could think of was that her cat was trying to show her something, which she knew was absurd, as cats couldn't show anyone anything. That is to say, they could, but certainly not consciously. There had been only one cat in Alice's lifetime that possessed the cognitive power to deliberately show her things and lead her places, but he was the farthest thought from her mind at that particular moment.

She found herself treading a familiar path, the one she had taken not moments before on her return from the grassy spot at which she had been having her solitary and unsuccessful picnic. Each time she found herself hoping she was still following the cat, she would hear a meow somewhere up ahead, although she could never catch a glimpse of the animal she was pursuing. It was only when she reached the meadow that she saw the flicker of movement again, and she hurried after it.

It must be understood that Alice's parents had chosen a home situated comfortably between the city and the country. It was neither highly developed nor underdeveloped, and therefore it was not an uncommon thing for there to be a rather large meadow. What was uncommon, however, was a young woman hurrying across it with her skirts gathered in her hands and chasing an elusive cat, occasionally muttering things to herself, such as "Oh dear I do hope he stops soon" or "Goodness, this is an awfully long journey for a cat". She was becoming impatient with this game already, and she found herself hoping that it would stop when she suddenly spotted, quite clearly, a cat making an unmistakable veer to the right and sprinting up a hill. Alice changed course abruptly and hurried
along in its wake, seeming to barely touch the ground in her haste. She reached the top of the hill and stopped abruptly for the second time that day, faced with a rather interesting sight.

There was a gate at the top of the hill. It was not a normal gate in that it was not part of a fence or a hedge or anything else. It was merely a gate, standing quite on its own at the top of the hill. It ran the entire length of the hill, so that the only way Alice would be able to go around it would be to backtrack and go down the hill, since she had not mastered the ability to walk sideways. There was also a great quantity of fog on the other side, preventing her from seeing anything beyond, which she found peculiar. The mist was swirling and undulating in great waves, but it did not seep through the gate towards her, and when she tried to peer around the gate to see what was on the other side, all she could see was fog. It was perplexing, she thought as she stood up straight, arms akimbo as she contemplated this anomaly in front of her. There was, she noted, just enough room on the side of the gate for her to be able to squeeze past and continue on down the hill. This she promptly attempted, with the result that, once she thought she had cleared the gate, she found herself right back where she started, standing directly in front of it. Thinking she had merely imagined going around the gate and therefore had assumed she had done it only to discover she actually hadn't (which had happened before and happened to the best of people, to be sure), she attempted this several times more, each time meeting with the same result, until she was forced to accept the fact that she was not imagining things.

After Alice had stood there simply staring at the gate for several moments, she noticed that one half of it was slightly ajar, much like the doors of her house had been. It was a gap just large enough for a cat to slip through, and Alice had a sinking feeling in her stomach that the only way to find her cat—if it even was her cat, her conscience reminded her—was to go through the gate. Hesitantly, she glanced over her shoulder once before venturing forward and placing her hand on the open half. The iron seemed to vibrate and hum under her hand, almost like it was alive and had been waiting for her. Unnerved, she pulled the gate open wide enough for her to pass and stepped through into the unknown mist beyond.

For a moment, she was quite certain that she hadn't gone anywhere, for she appeared to be in the same spot she was before, if not moved forward a little. But now she could see in front of her, and there was no obtrusive iron gate with strange mist swirling around behind it to block her path. Disconcerted, she swiveled on the spot to look behind her, fully expecting to see the gate (and the mist beyond it), only to discover that there was nothing there at all but more greenery. She marveled at this development, wondering if perhaps she had not fallen asleep, when she heard a steady lapping sound, as of waves gently slapping the side of a boat. She turned back to face front to discover that there was a boat, rocking slightly in a picturesque lake that seemed to stretch on for miles. Intrigued, Alice moved forward, all thoughts of mysterious vanishing gates and elusive cats forgotten.

There were no oars in the boat, which she found very odd—for how was she expected to paddle the boat (for, now that it was right in front of her, it seemed the only logical thing to do) without oars? Still, she tentatively made her way forward and daintily stepped into the boat, sitting down and allowing her voluminous skirts to balloon up around her until she could force them into a more seemly position, draped with casual elegance around her seated frame. She glanced about her, trying once more to see any kind of paddling device, but it was to no avail.

Splendid, she thought bitterly. I suppose this is to be some sort of hilarious allegory for my life. Well, I shall simply have to wake up and discover that this was all a dream. Almost as she had that thought and made to get out of the boat again, however, the small watercraft moved forward of its own accord, slicing easily through the water and only rocking very slightly and very gently as it moved along. Alice, for her part, was utterly dumbfounded, and she could only conjecture that the heat of the afternoon (despite the pleasantly cool breeze) was causing her to hallucinate and imagine lakes and magical self-paddling boats. She shifted uncomfortably, and she contemplated pinching herself
to wake herself up. Her shifting had caused the boat to rock rather dangerously, and she flung an arm out to cling to the side. Somewhere behind her, something sighed, and she turned wildly, nearly capsizing the small vessel.

"I do wish you wouldn't move about so much," said a lazy, disembodied voice from somewhere near the stern. "This boat, as you can see, is awfully small, and your shifting is making it rock quite dangerously. I wouldn't much like for it to capsize." Alice began to wonder if her mind was playing tricks on her, but almost as if it could read her thoughts, the voice continued: "No, no; I'm really here. Don't worry—I won't trouble you further. Just sit back and relax; the ride is quite a long one, you know."

Alice, to be frank, didn't know, and she wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to know. Still, she decided to obey the bodiless voice and settled herself more comfortably on her seat. The ride, as promised, was a long one, with the scenery on either side of the lake sliding from meadow to hills to forest. The sky was darkening as Alice finally noticed a shore ahead of the boat, and she picked her head up, thankful to see land again; she had been sitting with her chin propped on her hand for what felt like the last two hours or so, and she was becoming stiff and cranky. The boat bumped ashore inside of what appeared to be a forest, but it was the most macabre forest Alice had ever had occasion to stumble upon.

The trees were dark and gnarled, with no sunlight reaching through to the path she stepped onto. The path itself was overgrown and twisted, and she couldn't see where it led through all the bramble. She could just make it out as it wound to her left and disappeared behind a tree, and she noticed it doing likewise on her right. She found herself at a loss for which way to go, and she deliberated on the path for a while, looking back and forth. All of this seemed eerily familiar to her, a dream from so long ago she was surprised she still remembered the details with such clarity. Almost instinctively, she looked above her to one of the twisted, gnarled trees, half expecting to see a spectral, white grin suspended in thin air above one of the boughs, but there was nothing. The limb did not sway, and no grinning cat appeared to help her and point her in the right direction.

Perhaps it should have been strange that her mind fell so easily into place upon discovering herself in this unknown—and yet strangely familiar—terrain. The paradox may have been what wakened her latent senses, and she found herself not nearly as afraid and disoriented as she should have been. The fact of the matter was that she had known, somehow, that this was where she was bound to end up all along, from the moment she had returned home to find her front door ajar and had heard the creaking of the rocking chair with the mysteriously absent occupant. The disembodied voice on the boat began to make sense to her, but it wasn't helping her in her current predicament. She still found herself standing irresolutely at the crossroads, looking back and forth as if watching an invisible tennis match. She tried to remember what had occurred the last time, which way she had went. What was it that the cryptic, grinning cat had said?

"In that direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in that direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad."

Alice remembered what path she had taken, then; she had taken the left path, and she had come upon the small garden party with his eccentric occupants. Still, though she knew which direction she would inevitably end up traveling in—for, if the Hatter was not at the March Hare's cottage, Alice wasn't quite certain if she could handle encountering him on his own at his own house—she hesitated some more, teetering on the balls of her feet and biting her bottom lip. Still she waited for the smiling feline to appear on the branch above her head and tell her what to do—to explain what was going on. Nothing, however, happened, and soon Alice was forced to realize the simple fact that she was going to have no help this journey; at least, not unless she asked for it first.
"Cheshire Cat?" she asked timidly, taking a step toward the trees with its conspicuously vacant bough. "Are you there?" she ventured, now directly beneath it. Childishly, she reached up with one hand and swatted at the air below the branch, as if trying to brush the cat's moving tail with her own. Her hand, however, met no resistance, and the air above her remained devoid of any animal companion, so she sighed heavily and stepped back onto the path behind her. She stared for a moment longer at the branch, as if hoping that somehow she could make something happen just by staring. But then she sighed heavily, gathered her skirts, and turned to take the path to the left, slowly and carefully making her way down the bramble-strewn path to the tea party that she knew would await her at the other side of the Hare's garden gate.

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