

Gretel and the Journey to the Riverside

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Every morning around six Wayne and Gretel take a four-mile leashless walk, usually in Fort Washington Park. Fort Washington is a scenic and well-kept expanse that runs along the Hudson River several miles both north and south of the George Washington Bridge at 179th Street, or the GW for short. We live at 170th. The closest park entrance takes us directly to the foot of the GW and the Little Red Lighthouse, a now-defunct but picturesque structure of children's picture book fame.

From our apartment door it is north six blocks, from 170th to 176th Street on Haven Avenue, the westernmost residential street at that longitude. After this quick six-block jaunt within Manhattan's simple grid of neatly numbered streets, your comfortable solid footing upon structure dissolves. The neat map of right angles turns to gnarl as the metropolitan turns wild. Your path twists and trips and sometimes disappears entirely.

At 176th street, a footbridge takes you over two of the multiple vehicle routes that sprout like spaghetti from the GW. The roads race dizzily to re-orient themselves so as to mesh with their ultimate destination, such as the West Side Highway, the main route along Manhattan's western border, which runs as straight as the bridge but below it and perpendicular. The footbridge is supported by an old stone structure with castle-like windows: narrow, barred openings chiseled through stone – the kind out of which Rapunzel may have gazed as she combed her long golden hair.

At the end of this footbridge, stairs appear and then a foot ramp. The ramp twists three times underneath four of the roads that have snaked down from the George Washington Bridge. It zigs and zags over an expansive open area of littered hilly dirt that is shrouded in the shadows of the roads overhead. Incidentally, this location was the inspiration for the nineteenth-century Norwegian fairy tale "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," about three goats who seek to cross a bridge under which lurks a mean goat-eating troll. Given the number of times Wayne, Gretel, and I have passed through there, I am surprised that none of us has yet run into this guy.

The ramp emerges onto an off-ramp from the West Side Highway that leads up to a residential area at 181st Street. The highway entrance is 50 feet south. From here, you may walk directly onto the highway either north- or southbound, up into the residential area at 181st Street, northeast or southeast along the old stone scaffolding that supports the elaborate system of highways above, west across the street and into the woods, or west-and-slightly-north-a-bit across the street and down stairs and through a foot tunnel and up stairs to a specific location in these woods. Wayne and Gretel take this final option. Even though the foot tunnel is inhabited by shape-shifting shadows who smell of urine mixed with the vapor that steams off the River Styx in Hades, the Greek Underworld.

Once out of the foot tunnel and up steps etched into densely-packed dirt, you are in the woods. A considerable improvement from the journey so far: the woods are clean, as woods should be. They must be thin, as they are sandwiched by the highway and the Hudson, but they still manage to be thick enough to baffle a newcomer. Where to go from here?

From here, one may stumble across a variety of choices. One can walk directly ahead toward the house of the witch who attempted to cook Hansel and Gretel, south toward the seven dwarves' cabin and Rapunzel's tower, just a hair south-south west to the base of Jack's beanstalk, or north along the West Side Highway and past a construction site to the top of a foot path that snakes down to the base of the GW and the Little Red Lighthouse. Wayne and Gretel prudently choose this final option. It is early morning and they are not in the mood for trouble.

Down by the water, the complication is over. The foot path continues, but it is now a relatively straight arrow all the way down to 125th Street, where the park becomes Riverside Park. At 72nd, the greenery ends and the path becomes a more utilitarian lane for both feet and bicycles, down to the bottommost tip of the island. Even if you lose the path, the river offers a clue. Wayne and Gretel take it down to about 158th Street, with Gretel running blissfully along the water. At low tide, she even has her own private beach for twenty feet; not many others are out that early. She chases sticks Wayne throws into the water and paws the sand for magic beans.

Now, I have endeavoured to paint a picture of the learning curve involved with navigating from our apartment down to the water. The first time I attempted it, I did fine through the zig-zagging cement, but grew lost upon being dumped into the woods. Little Red Ridinghood has been lost in it for years now, last sited somewhere up around Inwood. (Albeit it isn't surprising that someone unable to distinguish a wolf from a grandmother also can't find a street light.) I finally happened upon the park by accident, via bushwacking. And to an animal, even the zig-zag ramp is not necessarily clear. Who wants to stay confined to cement when soft hilly trashy dirt lies on either side?

Well, this morning, Wayne and Gretel were about 50 feet from reaching the water as Wayne watched Gretel bounding ahead, blinked, and looked again and she was gone.

He figured that she must have gone after an animal and would reappear in a moment, as usual. When she didn't, he called her. She did not appear. He called and waited long enough to think, "Uh oh: she's never done this before." She hates being alone. She wants Wayne at hand at all times; as a puppy she would cry when he went to the bathroom. So he figured that she must have run on ahead to find him. The path along the water is straight and clear; she could easily follow it all by herself.

So Wayne continued along the river, visiting all of Gretel's favorite spots, including her beach, frantically calling her. All the way to 158th Street, a point beyond which he figured she would not go, as the two of them together had never done so. Then he turned around for home, dejected, wondering what to do.

Because of COVID and the increasing homeless population, these woods around the park are now dotted with homeless camps. If one of them found her, what would they do? Would they be able to call the number on her collar? That is, would they have phones? Or would they just decide to keep her? She is irresistibly adorable and sweet. Even if no human found her, the woods are expansive. She could eventually connect to Inwood Hill Park and around the tip of the island. Would she do that?

Wayne miserably pondered these possibilities all the way home, and arrived at our apartment steps – to find Gretel sitting there, ecstatic to see him.

Of course. What a brilliant little girl. She had emerged from wherever she had been, looked for Wayne and not seen him, and prudently headed home. Because he was bound to turn up there eventually. Up the hill, around eight bends, through the haunted foot tunnel, dodging any cars on the off-ramp, past the goat-eating troll. Granted, she did have her keen sense of smell: she and Wayne had only recently gone down the path, so perhaps she has simply smelled them back up it. Still. It was her decision that was so remarkable. The Peasant's Wise Daughter, of Grimm Brothers fame, would have fared no better.