

**Sadie's Way**  
**By Gary Corbin**

Sadie squinted through the fog that enveloped the steep trail and its surrounding pines, oaks, and Douglas firs. James, her husband of seven years, was barely visible, although he was only forty feet ahead. For the last half hour it had been like this. She struggled to keep up, hoping he would slow down to let her join him again. But he continued marching upward, never looking back to confirm that she was still behind him.

They hadn't spoken since their last argument – about whether to continue the hike in this fog, over thirty minutes ago – and she wasn't going to break the ice this time. She could show him stubbornness to match his own.

He had picked the trail. He had picked the time they would go. He had even picked hiking as the day's activity in the first place. She had wanted to work in the garden, pull some bulbs up before the first frost. “You *said* we should do more things together,” he'd pointed out, irritated. “This is at least a *together* activity.”

Once again, she'd given in. “You're right, honey,” she'd said, trying to smile. She'd pulled off her gardening gloves, set them on top of his golf clubs where he'd be sure to see them in the morning, and changed into her hiking boots. Nikes. Affordable, reliable, sturdy. Not an investment, like his six-hundred-dollar Millets. Her first car cost less than that.

Up the trail he went, and on she followed. She fingered the Almond Joy candy bar in the pocket of her backpack – his favorite, although she didn't really care for them – a surprise to share when they reached the top. But his pace picked up as he took longer steps, using his lean, six-foot frame to his advantage. James was challenging her, again, trying to force her to speak first, to ask him to slow down. Show weakness. Admit he was stronger, faster, right – again.

No. She would not. *In fact*, she realized, *I need to stop and tie my shoelace*. Sliding her backpack to the ground, Sadie bent to the task, taking her sweet time. She made sure it was

double-tied, then checked the other one. When she straightened again, he was gone.

She was alone.

What came next surprised Sadie. Sweat chilled her scalp. Her heartbeat quickened. Her breath, shallow with exertion just a moment ago, now came easily, but it was a deeper, longer breath, into the diaphragm rather than her chest. With the deep breaths came the smell of decaying foliage and the musky odor of clay soil. Her ears were hot; she could hear the low whistle of a whippoorwill, the cawing of crows, the rustling of chipmunks in fallen leaves, the chattering of squirrels. A nameless tune danced in her head; she embraced it, hummed along. There was nobody – no James – to tell her not to.

She was alone. Alone, and free. It was scary. And exhilarating.

She re-shouldered her pack and started forward, then stopped. No, dammit. What right does he have to force me up this hill? None. I can make my own decisions.

She turned and started walking downhill. There was suddenly a new sprightliness in her step, and not just because of the friendlier slope. As she hummed, the melody in her head became an aria, then a chorus. She let it roll forward, out of her mouth, forming syllables, gibberish rather than words. She needed no lyrics. She knew the song's meaning.

After a few minutes, Sadie noticed the fog thinning. The air was brightening, becoming easier to breathe, and the chill faded from her skin. She walked more quickly, exercising her body, feeling good. Feeling free. Freer than she had felt in a long time.

A long time. About, oh, seven years.

The realization sobered her. She felt a change roiling inside her, riding the crest of the song's wave. She found it, faced it, fell in love with it.

“James,” she said to the empty forest, “you controlling little pig. Thank you. *Thank* you.”

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