

Two Paths
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The sights, sounds and smells of home! Sam squeezed through the hedge and into her childhood. She knew every twist and turn on the narrow path through the deep undergrowth. Birds sang in the canopy above. She walked faster, eager to reach the clearing at the end of the path, relishing the familiar peace and serenity of her special place.

Shiani's stomach clenched, she would have to go out alone into the bush. With no sanitation, there was no other option but to brave the dangers of scrubland that stretched into infinity around the small cluster of huts that formed her village. She missed Tansi so much. Shiani remembered that dreadful night when her friend had been taken; dragged viciously into the grubby undergrowth. She had run back, screaming for help but, by the time they had found her, her beautiful, happy friend was bleeding and broken. She had been taken away by some charity workers. No-one now spoke her name. Shiani felt the anger growing within her, giving her the courage to enter the narrow path through the trees that she had followed since childhood. The familiar sights, smells and sounds failed to allay her fears. Her ears strained for the crack of a twig or the rustle of brushwood, or any other subtle warning of danger for a young girl alone in the bush.

Suddenly, there they were; a carpet of bluebells, even more breath-taking than Sam remembered them; an impossibly beautiful violet haze. Thousands of blooms bobbed gently in the warm, comfortable breeze. Sam ran to her favourite tree, a sycamore, each of its branches as familiar to her as her own strong young limbs. She climbed with ease to her seat, high above the forest floor. Sam listened to the friendly sounds of the wood; her wood.

Shiani pulled her bright shawl tightly around her, gaining some comfort from its soft warmth. Why had her mother chosen such a vibrant colour? She felt exposed as she ventured into the dry, dark scrub. The blue sky highlighted the dusty green of the undergrowth and accentuated the ridges in the arid earth. A sudden movement and a quiet creak sent an electric shock of fear through her. Shiani stopped, her breathing dangerously loud in her ears. A village dog darted across her path, causing her to cry out in shock.

Dusk began to close in. Sam started back along her secret path. She felt refreshed and happy, her mind full of childhood memories.

Shiani rearranged her clothing and headed quickly and quietly back along the path that led to her home and the safety of the village. She glanced behind her in sudden nervous, movements.

The girl approached the end of the path. As she stepped out, blinking into the light, a strong arm grabbed her, dragging her back into the gloom. Far away, another girl felt the warm evening sun on her face; and smiled.