

Earth Walking

By Jan Perry

If it did not stop raining soon, Princess Thelma was just going to go out and get wet anyway. Everyone told her that princesses could not play in the rain, but she was determined to go out and play with her new rocks. They arrived yesterday — a sixteenth birthday present from her uncle — and were sitting outside her windows looking so inviting.

Her uncle discovered the rocks on the planet with the funny sounding name. They changed color and shape depending on the weather. At the moment, they were brilliant cyan and long and sleek and looked perfect for lying on with a book. Earlier today, before the rain, they were rich cinnamon and crackly and bumpy. Then they had beckoned her to come climb. Then it started to rain and she couldn't leave the castle.

Her Mom called her. *It must be lunch time*, thought Thelma. She pushed the door open and stepped into the mover. She wanted to run, but that wasn't proper. Royalty had to use movers so that their feet wouldn't get dirty. *What a bunch of foolishness*, she thought as she was whisked to the dining arena. She took her place at the center of the arena with her parents and sister and two brothers.

As soon as they were seated the normal pandemonium broke out. Food was served, dancers danced, jugglers juggled, weightless wonders flew around the room doing flips and turns, the newest animals from the same planet as her rocks were on paraded by, and amazing fireworks were going off in the globe in front of the table.

Princess Thelma decided long ago that the reason for all of the diversions during the meals was because their cook was terrible — the food always tasted bland and mushy. Either way having diversions while she ate was helpful. She pushed the bronze button that caused the barrier to surround the family so that they could hear each other talk. She wanted to ask her parents, Queen Bethany and King Jeffers, to request that they proclaim the Right of Earth Walking for her for a period of one year. She put forth her argument and her sister and brothers looked at her dumbfounded. Her parents rolled their eyes.

“Thelma, dearest, how can we allow this? If your feet get dirty and someone recognizes you, crops would fail and the ships to the outer planets would have to

boycott us for the remainder of the year to assure no contamination of our family,” said the King.

“I was reading in the library,” Thelma started and this time all of the eyes in the room rolled in unison. Thelma was the reader and always brought disturbing and odd little pieces of archaic information to the meals. It did distract them from the food, but it also wearied everyone. Thelma continued undaunted, “I found an article from 2015 that described how physical contact with the earth helped people center themselves and become happier.”

“What does ‘center themselves’ mean? Were they lopsided?” asked her older brother Jason. Sometimes she felt true terror when she thought about the kingdom falling to him when her parents died. He was so literal; it drove her crazy.

“No, they were not lopsided, Jason. It means they could hear their hearts talk better when they walked bare-footed.”

“That makes no sense. Taking your shoes off has nothing to do with the acuity of one’s hearing. That is a fact,” Jason said and removed himself from the barrier.

The other brother and sister were now engrossed in the fireworks, which served Thelma just fine. “Mother, Father, I am not happy and haven’t been for many months now. I want to be a strong princess and to do my job in leading this planet as my time comes to do that. Right now, however, I am so consumed with sadness I can’t learn my lessons in planetary doctrine or the processes of travel projection. I believe if I could have one year of walking on the Earth, I would come back stronger and better able to fulfill my role for this family and this planet.” She had rehearsed this for a long while. It was hard to make wanting to play in the rain sound like a crucial step in becoming a planetary leader.

Her Mother sat motionless for several moments. She glanced at her husband. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Queen Bethany straightened more, if that was even possible. Then she said, “You have put your case forth with honesty and fervor. We grant your wish with the following conditions. You must never be recognized as Princess Thelma, you must return immediately anytime that the signal is shone, and you must speak only to women and girls. Can you accept these conditions?” asked her Mother.

You have got to be kidding, thought Thelma. I can accept any conditions to escape and play in the rain and climb on my rocks and swim in the lake. The victory is at hand! Her heart was pounding so hard she was sure everyone could see it. “They are

difficult conditions, but I accept them,” Thelma said with great somberness. “When will this right be proclaimed and when will I need to return?”

“You must leave before mid-day tomorrow and return in exactly 259 days. You have our blessings and our love. We hope you will find your center and your happiness,” said her Father as he rose, the signal for all of them to leave the eating arena. As quickly as the chaos in the arena started, it was over.



Thelma could have gotten to her room without touching the floor without the mover she was so excited. “Tomorrow at mid-day my quest begins. I wonder what dirt feels like? I wonder what I should take with me?” She had dreamed about this day for years; she never thought it could happen. She had no plan. She recognized that was not good.

When she got to her room she started making lists of what she would need—clothes, food, books, tools, a horse. In the midst of the list making her Father knocked on her door and entered. “I see you are making lists for your Earth walking. I wanted to give you this gift for your time away.” He handed her a small wooden box that looked quite plain.

“Thank you, Father,” Thelma said. “May I open it now?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said.

Thelma opened the box and found three packets of papers. One was a description of how to make a shoe; the second was a list of plants never to eat from the wild; and the third was a well-worn notebook with the handwritten title of “Earth Walking 101.” Thelma looked up at her father. “You did an Earth Walk, Father?”

“No. Your mother did. These are three of her prized possessions, she asked me to give them to you.”

“I must go talk to her!” The words exploded from her mouth.

“No, I am representing all of the family this evening. You will leave tomorrow with no good-byes from the rest of the family. The kitchen staff has been given instructions to provide you with some basic things you will need. I want you to know that we all

love you and wish you well and look forward to seeing who returns in 259 days.” Her Father kissed her forehead and left.

Thelma sat stunned. She had not expected this sense of importance from her parents, nor the sense of foreboding that she was feeling. She began to wonder if playing with those new rocks was what this was all about. She looked in the box and picked up the instructions on making a shoe. “What is a shoe?” she wondered.

By morning she had made something that looked roughly like what was in the pictures. The instructions strongly encouraged her (or whoever this was written for, it looked very old) to have shoes before they left home. It also said not to put them on until well away from home — at least two hours. She put her shoes, clothes, and other items in her carrier. It followed her as she walked to the kitchen to get whatever they had prepared for her. There was a box with her name on it, but no one was in the kitchen. The note said that she should leave promptly before the kitchen staff returned. She put the box in her carrier and headed out the door. She was pleased that she had the carrier, all of the things she had packed would have been too heavy to carry for long.



She walked into the surrounding forest. After a couple of hours, she found a place to stop. She sat on a rock and got out her shoes with the instructions for how to wear them. Her feet were sore from the rough path; she hoped that the shoes might help that. She also saw that the kitchen staff had packed a water flask and something labelled a traveling biscuit. She sipped on the water and ate a biscuit. Wait! The biscuit was crunchy and slightly sweet. It wasn't mushy and it wasn't bland. It was delicious! *Why did they not have these in the castle?*

She walked another few hours and came to a town. She pulled her cap low on her head; she had meant to cut her hair, but she did not have time after she made her shoe last night. The shoe was actually working quite well, that gift from her Mother was much appreciated. She went to a park to sit and think about her next dilemma, finding a place to sleep for the night. She was sitting on a bench taking the town in and pondering. A woman walking a strange looking animal sat on the bench beside her.

“How are you this gorgeous day?” the woman said.

“I am doing well. And yes, it is a gorgeous day,” Thelma replied.

“You are new to the town. Are you going to be here long?” asked the woman.

“My plans are a bit uncertain, but I expect that I will be here for a couple of days, maybe a little longer.” Suddenly Thelma realized she needed a story — and a name. She needed a reason to be here and something for people to call her. She started looking around to get ideas while trying not to look panicked.

“My name is Grace and I live down this road about five minutes. You have arrived at our festival. We have lots of musicians and actors and vendors in town and I am afraid that the hotels will be full. Do you have a place to stay?” she asked with concern in her face.

“The festival sounds lovely,” said Thelma. She spied a beautiful lily in a garden in the park. “My name is Lilly and I didn’t know about the festival and did not make reservations. Do you have any suggestions?”

“My sister and I live together and we have a small shelter that guests stay in at times. It isn’t fancy, but it has all of the basics. You would be welcome there for a few days until your plans settle in.”

Grace seemed like a good person and living with her sister it might be easy to avoid talking with men. “That would be wonderful.” Thelma was happy that she thought to bring some money and some things that she could sell if she needed more money. “And you must let me pay you some rent.”

“That will be fine Lilly. Shall we head on to the house? Maybe we can find something for supper.”

The two women and the strange animal headed down the road. In five minutes, they were at the gate of a captivating tiny home. Grace took Thelma inside and showed off her home. She was obviously proud of it. “The place where you will be staying is where we lived while we built this place.”

“You built this?” asked Thelma. It was a gorgeous small building that had all of the hallmarks of a cozy home.

“My sister and I did. Our parents wanted boys and got us, so they taught us all of the building trades. That is how we earn our living. Building has been very good to us,” said Grace. “Joy will be home shortly. She is finishing up a job on the south side of town.”

“Joy is your sister?” asked Thelma.

“Yes. She is not quite as pleasant as her name suggests, but we love each other and work well together. You will meet her soon. Let’s take you to your place so you can get settled in before dinner.”

They walked to the back of the yard to another little house. It wasn’t as fine as the first, but it was more than serviceable. “This is enchanting, Grace,” said Thelma. “You two are really talented. I love this,” Thelma said as she put her carrier on the bed in the back of the house. Grace gave her a short tour and instructions on how everything worked and then headed back to her own house to start dinner.

“I’ll ring the bell when dinner is ready and you can just head on over.” When she got back to her house, Grace gave the bell a whack with the hammer hanging next to it. No chance that Thelma would miss that!

“See you soon,” Thelma shouted back as she went back inside her place. Her place. She had never had her own whole place. Thelma was feeling a bit more relaxed than when she left. She put a few of her things away and sat in the chair. She opened her box and got out the booklet – Earth Walking 101. She had not had any time to read it.

The first words were: “They told me to trust no one, but I found that I had good instincts about who to trust and they never let me down. My first night out was spent in a lovely tiny house with a woman named Grace and her sister Joy.” Thelma stood up, shut the book, went to the bed, sat down and read the first words gain. They still said the same thing. Thelma put the book back in the box and sat in the chair and tried to piece things together. Grace’s strange little creature came in her open door and curled up at her feet and promptly fell asleep with her head-on Thelma’s foot. The contact was comforting.

The bell rang. Thelma jumped. She was deep in thoughts about her Mother’s words. How could this be? How could their Earth Walks both start by meeting identical people in places? She headed out the door and the little creature joined her. She decided that forthrightness was the appropriate approach. She would just ask Grace at dinner.

“Good evening,” said Grace. “You do not look as if you rested. In fact, you look a bit agitated. Is everything OK?”

“I had a bit of a start as I was unpacking. I read some notes that someone gave to me for the start of my journey. They started a similar journey 20 or 30 years ago.”

Grace was in the dining area where the table was full of things that Thelma had never seen before. There was a bowl of green leafy things with red and white bits of something else in it, another bowl of mushy white stuff (that did look familiar), and another plate of slices of something brownish-red and juicy. Thelma wondered if this was what they ate; it certainly appeared that way. Grace sat at one end of the table and told Thelma to sit wherever she would like. About that time another woman entered the room.

“Lilly, I would like you to meet my sister, Joy. Joy, this is the young woman I told you about this afternoon. She will be staying with us for a while.” Grace seemed like such a comfortable hostess. Thelma hoped she could learn some of those skills from her.

“Welcome to our little home,” said Joy. “We don’t have company often. Excuse the simple meal.”

“I am thankful that you’ve offered me shelter and food. The start of my journey was a bit faster than I expected and I wasn’t able to make the preparations I would’ve liked,” said Thelma.

“Earth Walks always start faster than.... Stop that! Why are you kicking me Grace? I am speaking the truth!” said Joy looking a bit irate.

“I’m just learning about Earthwalks,” said Thelma. “Have you had much experience with them?”

Grace was obviously flustered. Joy beamed as if the question trumped Grace’s kick. Thelma wondered if Grace was always trying to stop Joy from talking.

“We are the first stop for all Earth-walks. They always seem to start roughly or too fast or with some type of problem. Our job is to facilitate a successful journey.” Joy seemed quite pleased that she had been asked about their job.

“What do you mean?” asked Thelma. “I thought Earth-walks happened rarely and the walker was to accomplish it alone.”

“Right,” said Joy and Grace simultaneously as they rolled their eyes.

“No one can do anything without help from others in some way. Accomplishing things alone is a great falsehood that has been spread by people who wish to create mischief.” Joy was obviously enjoying the role of expert.

“How long have you been doing this?” asked Thelma.

“About seventy-five, maybe eighty-five years,” said Joy as she glared at Grace daring her to kick her under the table again.

“Wait! You can’t possibly be that old! What is going on here? Am I in danger?” Thelma realized how foolish the questions were, but they came out of her mouth before she could think.

“Here, eat some supper. I can tell we will be here for a long while this evening. You will feel better with a full stomach.” Grace was passing her the dish of green stuff. Thelma felt almost as if the offer was an order. She put some green stuff on her plate and then the mushy stuff and then sliced thing. “No more talking about Earth-walks until we finish supper,” said Grace.

Thelma ate a forkful of the green stuff. “This is delicious!” she exclaimed. “What is it?” she asked as she tried the mushy stuff. “Wow, this is great, too. And what is that?” she asked pointing to the brownish red stuff.

“This is plain country folk food. Mashed potatoes, salad with tomatoes and cucumbers, and some roast beef. You look as if you’ve never tasted this before,” said Grace.

“She hasn’t. She’s royalty and we have them to thank for this,” said Joy.

Thelma’s heart stopped. How did they know she was royalty? Had she just doomed her planet? She looked at Joy. “What do you mean — about the royalty and thanking them for the food?”

“This is the way everyone on this planet eats except those who rule,” said Joy. “So, if you don’t know what this is, you must be royalty.” She looked at Grace, “They eat the most horrible stuff as a sacrifice for the rest of us. By giving up this pleasure, they assure the prosperity of the planet.”

“I know that! This isn’t my first first-contact, you know.” Grace’s eyes were blazing.

“That makes no sense,” said Thelma. “Why would they do that and why would that even work? That sounds like some silly old tale that someone just made up.”

“It’s true,” said Grace. “And to the first part of your question, we are some of the ancients. Our role is to assist those who seek. You seem to be one of those seeking.”

“Seeking! That sounds way too honorable,” Thelma said. “I started this so that I could play in the rain and climb rocks.” Something seemed to be going seriously wrong. “What are ancients?” she asked.

Joy nodded. “That is the way most quests start. Someone is bored and wants to have fun and they find out that fun comes at a price.”

“Well, that’s not right,” exclaimed Thelma. “What’s wrong with having fun and playing? Playing in the rain or climbing on those rocks that change color and shape would make me happy. And, if I did it with someone else, we would both be happy. And we might even learn that we need to help each other get over a big crack in the rock or that when we both thought hard about or discussed some problem we might actually come up with a solution that would work. How can someone sacrificing tasty food fix any problem? This is crazy!”

Grace and Joy shimmered a bit. Thelma blinked when she saw that, but then they were solid again. “What did you two just do? What was that shimmery thing?” asked Thelma.

“We were consulting with some other people. It seems that your desire to play has some interesting side effects. Does play always help you solve problems and work with others?” asked Grace.

“How should I know! I’m never allowed to play! It just seems like it would. The whole reason I’m here is that I want to see what happens when I climb and run around and get my feet dirty!” Thelma realized that she was getting a bit worked up. One of the first lessons her parents taught her in Planetary Leadership was one should never get worked up. She took a deep breath. She was not sure what to do to undo the display of passion. She was also not sure she wanted to undo it. Saying what she wanted to say and saying it with energy had actually felt pretty good.

“I have more questions. Who are the ancients? And how do you consult with people by shimmering? And where are the people you are consulting with? And how do you make this food taste so good?”

Grace and Joy sighed. In their long years of assisting seekers, none had asked these questions. Most asked questions about truth and purpose and philosophy. But this young one was asking to play and how to cook and who they were. No one had

questioned the sacrifice of the rulers. That was new, too. How could they explain the need for a mother's sacrifice to take care of her infant or a father's sacrifice to go to war when necessary?

"I heard that! Why did I hear that? I heard what you were thinking. This is too weird!" Thelma was getting worked up again. "And they are way different. My Mother didn't have a choice but to stay up with my little brother when he was sick and my Father didn't have a choice when our land was invaded. What has what food they eat got to do with anything? And why could I hear you think?" Thelma was definitely worked up.

Suddenly the little house disappeared around them and they were in a large hall and several people were sitting around in a circle. They looked regal by their bearing, but not by their attire. They were wearing normal clothes and did not look special at all, except that they looked proud in a humble way, like their pride was based on something they possessed but they knew that they did not do anything to deserve it. And they were all smiling. One of them started chuckling. Joy! "You are a special young lady," she said. "Few people end up here at all and even fewer end up here because they want to climb rocks and get their feet dirty."

A woman added, "How we love to see passion, especially when it is so imaginative. You want to know truths and recipes. Your desires are delightful." All of the circle people were grinning and nodding. The woman walked over to her and handed her a basket of lilies. "Take these home to your parents. Your Earth walk, is complete."

The hall faded and Thelma was back on the path that she had been walking that morning. What an unsettling day! The only thing to do seemed to be to head home.



She arrived at the castle within a few hours. The lilies looked as fresh and beautiful as when they had been given to her. She entered the kitchen and rang King Jeffers and Queen Bethany's bells as she headed to their chambers.

"Daughter! Right on schedule. Welcome home. You have been missed." Her Mother embraced her and her Father kissed her forehead.

Thelma wondered why they were acting like they hadn't seen her for months. She smiled and said, "I was given these to give to you, Mother. Wait, what do you mean right on time?"

Her mother turned white when she looked in the basket.

"You were to return in 259 days and tomorrow is the 259th day," said her Father.

"What's wrong Mother? You are as white as the flowers, is something wrong with the flowers?" asked Thelma. Her Father brought a chair for her Mother.

"Nothing is wrong. In fact, all is well. The prophecy is fulfilled. Our imprisonment is over." Her Father looked incredulous. Thelma brought him a chair, he looked like he might fall, too.

"What's happened?" asked Thelma. "I just left this morning but you're telling me months have passed."

"When you cross into the forest, time changes," her mother said. "Long ago wars waged on this planet. The Ancients intervened and imprisoned the Royals because they had done such a poor job of creating peace. They said they would send us lilies of peace when we sent them a pure lily and a ruler. No lilies grew within the palace grounds, so in spite of our best efforts to become better leaders, we were never able to send a lily. Somehow, your Earth-walk must have been that. What happened while you were gone?"

Thelma looked sheepish. "Beats me," she said. "I met a woman named Grace. You said that I shouldn't be recognized so, when she asked who I was, I panicked and said the first thing I saw, was a lily."

"Queen Lily has quite a ring to it," said her mother as she put her crown on Lily's head. Her father removed his crown and put it away until it would be needed.

"Does this mean that I still can't climb on the rocks and play outside?" the new Queen Lily asked looking down-hearted.

"It means you are the ruler and you make the rules," her father smiled.

Queen Lily grabbed her parent's hands and they ran out to the rocks. Today they were purple, lavender, and magenta and shaped just like thrones.