

Woods Holding Secrets

The lake was lined with silver. The sun reached out to pick the color up even as it slid away. Alex was playing with the rocks by the water, picking them up and leaving their old craters behind. As the water took the pebbles out of his hands, they didn't stop to say goodbye to him. But then again he did not mourn over them, either. The breaking leaves took their place as he jumped up to catch them. He hid in the trees so often his shadow dared to stay on that branch. A yell came from the kitchen window. It was time for dinner as the natural light left and lamps clicked on in summer cottages.

In the morning, Alex walked past his parents sitting at the table. They had their noses in an article about U.S. gas prices. The toys in the corner of Alex's closet stayed there. He didn't want to shake dinosaurs and make up fake noises for his plastic animals.

"Dad, do you want to go hiking?" he said.

"Not now. Later, Alex."

He slipped on his shoes and ran out the door anyway. Alex walked past the chipped house and below the trees. He came to a valley of green among the lowlights. He dipped down to observe them and he recognized some of them from his dad's nature books. They fit the description of some plants that were going extinct. He could almost see them quivering in his presence. He reached out to feel their foliage and then turned back to the forest. The leaves broke each other's fall as the wind carried them from the familiar home of a stocky trunk.

The woods took in each one of Alex's steps. He scanned the areas for animals but he always walked beating his sneakers into the ground to scare them off before he could see them. The only sounds were black birds attempting to speak above the wind. Alex had heard his dad

talk about deer, beavers, and muskrats but most of all a distinct animal known as the porcupine. His eyes kept looking through the trees and behinds the bushes, but all of the sounds grew quieter as he moved farther into the woods. The trees got thicker and they looked down at him, growing more intimidating. Feeling a bit nervous, he turned around to head back to the blue house, but all that was around him was green.

Nothing looked familiar. The trees all looked the same. He heard something behind him and tried to pick up his legs and carry them faster but they got hung up on rocks. He kicked his feet up, increasing his speed. The leaves sunk beneath him. He looked for the birds he spotted earlier but could only imagined their sounds now, far off in the distance.

“Dad?” he yelled.

His voice simply echoed then faded, stolen by the wind. Alex kept his speed hoping to see the grey shingles of his roof catch his eye amid the green. Even as he squinted them against the breeze, his eyes grew bigger as they filled with fear.

He noticed some large logs that he had remembered seeing. It seemed as though he had been going in circles. Alex kept running, trying to search for breaths that weren't there. He tried changing his direction slightly. Then he heard splashes of water and thought he might be close by. The roots below him got bigger, grabbing at his feet, until finally one tugged him down. His face hit the dirt. He looked up and saw blue patches behind the brows of the trees. Alex was relieved to see his cottage but got up slowly with his head hung low. Perversely, he didn't want to go home until he caught a glimpse of an animal that belonged to the forest.

“Alex!” He heard his mom calling for lunch.

He pushed his hand up from the ground but felt something sharp underneath his palm. It looked like a brown needle with pale white tips. One of the ends was staked into the ground. He marveled at it, plucking the spear between two fingers to take home.

As he turned to head toward his cottage he wondered about what he had found. At that moment, something behind him rustled and he saw what the quill belonged to – a plump animal, crawling on the ground, with identical quills sticking out all over him. Alex continued staring at it as it started to wobble to a small tree. Its quills started to tuck in from his body as it climbed up.

“Alex! Lunch,” his mom called.

He didn’t want to leave the company of this curious being. This must be what his dad was always talking about: the porcupine. His dad said these animals can be an annoyance to humans so many shoot them before winter time. Alex couldn’t imagine hurting this unusual creature.

“Don’t be scared,” Alex said to the retreating animal. “I won’t tell anyone about you...and I’ll keep your needle safe. I promise.” He ran towards the blue patches, which quickly became his house, and ran up the steps.

“What have you been up to?” his dad asked. “You’re covered in dirt.”

“An adventure.”

“What kind of adventure?”

“I can’t say exactly.”

“Why not?” Alex’s dad didn’t look angry, only curious.

“I promised him.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you!” Alex shouted. He ran to his room and grabbed the quill from his pocket, tucking the gift of the porcupine safely in his drawer. He would keep it a secret just between them.