

The Dog and the Woods

“Never go into the woods,” my fourth grade teacher said as we were getting ready for recess. “Never throw sticks, and never act like a squirrel.”

“Those three statements have nothing to do with each other” I whispered to a girl next to me.

During recess I did none of those things, even though I longed to just take a step into the woods, and no more. I was afraid to do any more because the vast ocean of trees somehow seemed repellent. The woods circled the school and the two playgrounds. There was so much woods, and it seemed odd that we could not go in it. The woods seemed to go on forever. Standing at the beginning of the woods, I heard a distant whistling noise, and I walked to my classroom in some kind of a trance, forgetting to look back. When I got to the classroom, we learned about the history of the school, involving Mr. Eber White.

When I came home from my first day of school my parents and I talked about the woods.

“Maia! You need more confidence! Go play in the woods!” They told me again, not the first time.

“My teacher told me to never go into the woods” I reply.

“She says that because she is responsible for 27 children. When you are with us, you can go. Don’t worry, you’re safe.”

“Fine. I’ll go.” I said reluctantly. Trying to drag my body in an effective way, I walked to the closet, and found my hiking boots and fleece.

I used to play in the woods at our old house until we moved here in May, I did it every day, even on the winter days when the wind was so strong that all the snow from the ground blew into my face. And ever since we moved, my parents have been telling me to go in the woods so much.

“Bye!”

As I walked down the sidewalk, I suddenly felt confident, I remembered, nothing bad has ever happened on a beautiful and sunny September afternoon.

Nature is my passion, so whenever I step outside, all my worries are history. With my worries gone, I skipped all the way to the woods,

When I got there, I rested my body on a tall oak tree. At that exact moment, I felt a shiver run down my spine. I didn’t feel confident anymore. Enraged by that, I broke a low branch off the tree and threw it onto the ground, my hands sticky with sap. A second later, I heard an unfamiliar voice in my head.

“Where do you want to go?” The voice said.

“Who are you?” I asked, scared.

“During slavery, I was one of Mr. Eber White’s ghost dogs. I don’t want to give too much information, but, I’ll continue. Before I joined Mr. Eber White, I used to track slaves, and when I found them, I would take them back to their masters. But after I died, I came back as a ghost to transport slaves to freedom because I wanted to do good. I felt bad about helping the slave hunters. Even though all slaves are free now, I still have to transport people when they throw a stick.”

Mr. Eber White! I thought, didn't he donate his land to Eberwhite Elementary? He also helped with the underground railroad! We learned about him in school! “Why are you talking to me telepathically? And why can’t I see you?” I asked in my head.

“One more time, I am a ghost dog. So I am only seen If I want to be seen.” I heard in the voice that was not mine.

A ghost dog! All this is making sense, the teachers know about the ghost dogs. “Never go into the woods, never throw sticks, never act like a squirrel!” I remembered. “Mr. Ghost Dog, what do you do when someone throws a stick?”

“I ask them where do you want to go? And I take them to the place they want to go” the dog said.

Aha! I thought. But this is fantasy, there is no fantasy in the real world. How is this possible?... Maybe... .. “Hello? You still there?” the voice grabbed me and ripped me off of my distant train of thought with such force that I jumped. “What?” I said.

“Where do you want to go?” the voice said angrily.”Ya know, we don’t have all day.”

“Uh, I don’t want to go anywhere.” I said.

“Oh come on! All this time wasted!” the ghost dog said. And with a cold chill sent down my spine, the voice disappeared.

Later that night as I went to bed, I turned off my night-light, closed my eyes, and started to fall into a bottomless pit of darkness. As I drifted off to sleep, the thought of the fantastic woods woke me up, full of curiosity. My eyes opened quickly, and I tiptoed down the stairs. I put on my coat and headed outside. I felt the cold and the wonderful nighttime air as I walked to the woods.

As I got to the woods, I crept into a sea of darkness. Everything was silent, except for the occasional swishing of trees that made my whole body tense. On top of a branch, at first, all I saw was darkness. Then slowly, I began to see two orbs of shining green light. My whole body became even more tense, and I was breathing very fast. Then, a figure spread its gigantic wings, and flew off in the distance. The orbs were gone. I realized that it was just a owl. So I became

calmer, but still tense. As I walked on through the mighty woods, I began to notice that no matter how far you go into the woods at night, you will always see darkness in front of you. I was so alert, that even the slightest sound would make me jump. But I still walked further.

At the foot of a great oak tree, I broke off a low branch and threw it far off in the distance. I felt a shiver run rapidly down my spine.

“Where do you want to go?” a deep, dog-like voice said in my head, bored.

“Nowhere. But, I have a question for you.” I answered curiously. “What do you look like, can you show yourself?”

“Indeed I can.” the ghost dog answered. Then, in front of me, a huge, solid fur covered mass appeared with emerald green eyes, and a face you could see right through. You could see sadness.

“Why is your face full of sadness?” I asked.

“The reason I feel sad is because I am stuck transporting runaway slaves. But there are no slaves to transport anymore. And Eber has died. Eber was a good master, I assure you. But I long to live a normal dog life. I have heard that the sap in the trees contains a power that can make me forget certain things. You see, if I go and live like a normal dog, when someone throws a stick, I will go to them. Muscle memory. Very hard to forget. May I ask a question? ... Can you help me...?”

“Yes.” the one word I muttered sends the black dog running in circles, chasing his tail.

“Ok now, break off a branch from the oak tree you are next to. ...Perfect! Now, apparently, I need to eat it.” I held the branch up to the dog’s mouth, and let the golden sap trickle into the great dog’s mouth. He swallowed. We waited.

“Wasn't that supposed to work?” we both asked, unaware that a purple smoke began to appear. Soon enough, the smoke became so thick, we could not even see each other, a minute later, I saw the shadow of a dog standing in front of me. The smoke cleared. Now I could see the dog clearly. “Did it work?” I asked. “Well, let’s see!” He answered. I walked a couple of yards and threw a stick. All I heard was the call of the morning birds. I walked back, seeing that the dog had not gone anywhere. We both knew it worked. We smiled, said our farewells, and I walked back to my house, hoping we would see each other again.