

THE WOOD OF RABID RACCOONS

Being seven at the time and quite sure of my capabilities, I decided one summer morning that I should have an adventure. My brother Jack had amazed me time and time again with stories of daring expedition and cunning discovery. In winter, he and Rob—his friend and partner in crime—would brave the cold and venture out into the forest to shoot squirrels and even the occasional porcupine. In spring, Rob would scurry up trees in search of blue jay eggs to show off at school. Every Saturday during summer, Jack and Rob would go off to Aunt Harriet's old place in the woods to play with our cousins. My brother was the undisputed champion of wrestling thereabouts: no one in Aunt Harriet's neighborhood could pin him.

Because I was too young—and deemed a wuss by Jack—I never got to come. I felt it was unfair to leave me out, and on lonely summer Saturdays I often pretended to be Rob, the daredevil, when he and Jack were not around. I would think up a variety of stunts and challenges, and defy all odds by completing them with a single eye open, or only one foot on the ground. The activities helped a little, but I could never quite be content. Every time I almost forgot about Aunt's Harriet's place, I'd be sprung on by a vision of boys racing and wrestling. No matter how hard I might try, these were things I could never do by myself. Mother tried to comfort me, but I still craved the company of masculine gruffness and the distinct smell of mischief in the air.

It was on one such Saturday that my escapade took place. Depressed at once more being left out, I determined once and for all to show Jack and Rob my true mettle. I decided to go down into the woods behind our barn. These woods were rarely trod, and for good reason: they were the fright of the whole town. Mysteriously quiet and dark, even Rob would seldom tramp through its depths. The trees were a dark soggy color, and bark often fell from them without warning, hitting any unlucky passers-by. Jack had told me countless times of the giant scarecrows and werewolves lying in wait. There was a vampire ghost that haunted the entrance most days and a rabid raccoon always on the prowl, foaming at the mouth, with eyes that were *bright white*. Both Jack and Rob bade me beware of that patch of forest. Despite Mother's reassurance, I still believed most of what I was told. While I could not conceive of the vampire/werewolf business, the rabid raccoon seemed possible. Once, as Jack and Rob were passing on the latest rumors concerning the grove, I wondered aloud how they knew what haunted it when they'd never stepped foot inside. The two exchanged knowing glances before Jack said in a low voice, "One of the boys up on Aunt Harriet's lane went in there once. We did his Saturday chores for him, and in exchange he told us about his adventures. That's how we learned, and judgin' by what the boy said, we're the only ones 'sides him who knows about it." It seemed the boy was some deal traumatized by the whole affair, and had refused to tell anyone, save Jack and Rob. My plan was to venture into the depths (with caution, of course) and live to tell the tale.

I was in the midst of gathering provisions from the pantry when who should happen upon me but Mother herself, wearing a flour-dusted apron and a questioning look. She inquired, as mothers do, about just where I thought I was going. Having forgotten to fabricate an alibi for my strange expedition, I reluctantly told her about my plan, and how once Jack and Rob saw I could handle myself in the direst of situations, they would simply *have* to let me join in their adventures. She listened and nodded, and I wondered if this was making sense to her after all. After I finished she smiled and simply told me to carry on, in such a fashion that I was suspicious until she—seeing my hesitation—smiled

again, fetched the vanilla from the pantry shelf, and returned to the kitchen. Sighing in relief, I quickly got back to my work.

I brought healthy rations, most of which I consumed in preparation for my expedition. I wanted no burdens if for some reason I needed to flee. I did not plan to overstay my welcome, but I did want to see *something* spectacular before I left. I imagined sauntering up to Jack and Rob as they returned from Aunt Harriet's. "How was your trip?" I would ask them with a slightly bemused smile on my face. They would look curiously at me for a moment, but then launch into their tales of daring do. Then Jack would ask his usual question: "What trouble did you get into while I was gone?" I'd just grin mysteriously, not taking the bait. "Nothing much. I swung on the tire swing and climbed partway up the old oak tree. Oh, yeah, and I also saw a few..." Here my daydream ran aground. What *would* I see? I had no real inkling. I glanced at the patch of woods. There was only one way to find out. I took a deep, cleansing breath, and stepped forward into the forest.

The first thing I noticed upon entering the grove was that it was extremely dark. Outside the leafy canopy it was just past midday, but here it felt like dusk. A bit of light struggled through the trees in melancholy patches, but for the most part it was little better than my bedroom closet. Cautiously, I looked around. It sure was a scary place. The trees were packed tightly together, and here and there ivy and moss wound tightly around their necks. To the left, something resembling a path led away into the gloom. I tilted my head, listening for the sounds of the savage beasts who were no doubt hiding nearby. When I failed to catch even the faintest scratch, hiss, or grunt, I conceded that the animals must be asleep. Now was the perfect time, I realized, for my adventure: with the most immediate threats dozing, I could explore this shadowy jungle uninhibited. Filled with a heightening mix of excitement and fear, my curiosity won the day and I began walking along the cramped trail that wound ahead.

The pathway was soft underfoot, the ground giving way to centuries worth of pine needles. Little by little, patches of mud began appearing—small ones, but too large for my liking. It must now be mentioned that I had a strange aversion to mud. It was not exactly that I was *scared* of the brownish substance; my caution lay more in the fact that here was something that—in perhaps my moment of greatest need—could suck me suddenly into its loathsome grasp. As mud began to appear, my confidence began to wane. Before long, almost without realizing it, I started walking far abreast of these patches until I was winding along guided more by the mud than the grove's openings. When I paused to gaze around and listen, I realized I could no longer see even a small opening through the thick vegetation. I looked around me. Suddenly, I was disoriented. I quickly looked behind me—or what I thought was behind me—until I heard a rustle in front of me—or behind me, now—or was it beside me? I whipped my head around to face the sound, but it had stopped. Partly relieved and partly shaken, I returned to face the right. Or was it the *left*? Which way was left anyhow? Couldn't it be either direction, depending on where you looked? Or did it depend on where you were looking *from*? Thoroughly befuddled, I promptly sat down.

What happened next is a bit blurred in my memory—though I will leave it up to the reader to discern whether I might prefer it this way. Underneath me was an enormous patch of sticky, ferocious mud. At least that's what it felt like at first. When I jumped up in alarm and studied the ground for whatever it was that I'd sat on, there was only a thin dark shadow, making me aware of just how dark the woods had gotten. Then, to my horrified amazement, the shadow moved, bounding away in a flash of white stripes and a furry black tail! I was about to run after it, when the weirdest sensation grabbed

my attention. I had smelled almost all there is to smell and then some. My nose had encountered the aromas of burnt toast, vinegar, and underwear—and I had a brother, which meant I was also well-acquainted with the wafting smells of sweat and flatulence. This smell wasn't like any of the others. Surprisingly poignant, the smell was like a mixture of clearance cologne and a stink-bomb gone wrong. It was strangely *soft* and *sharp* at the same time, and it was steadily getting stronger. I looked around for the source of the smell, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. Confusing me further was a nagging feeling that I should move along. Then, it all came together.

Needless to say, I somehow found my way out of that forest—don't ask me how I found a suitable path where a minute before none had existed—and flew around a bit before running into our house in an insane whirlwind. I yelled for Mother, who came running in—and who then immediately yelled at me to get back outside! I rushed out, then fell to the grass crying. I tried to explain to her that I had rabies, but she didn't seem to understand! “A rabid raccoon bit me, Mother! Don't you smell it?” I wailed. She said she sure did, and she led me to the backyard while telling me to take every bit of clothing off. I did so, relieved that she finally realized what I meant. I showed her where the raccoon had bitten me, and she handled it much better than I had. She just smiled and said she'd call the doctor as soon as she got rid of my stinky clothes!

