

The Woods are Lovely
by Kim Switzer

Ben paused as the path curved close to the deepest part of the woods. Twilight left the way ahead barely visible. The forest itself was nothing more than a heavy mass of black off to his right.

As a child, he would have been running as fast as he could go to get past this spot. Of course, as a child he would never have taken the forest path at twilight. He would have gone the long way around and taken the whipping when he got home late.

Everyone said this was the most dangerous time to pass through the woods, the time when the forest's lure was the strongest. Ben wasn't sure he believed all the stories, though. The old folk all had tales of so-and-so's brother or cousin or uncle who had disappeared on the forest path. It was never someone known by anyone alive in the village now. And no one in Ben's memory had gone missing. It was all ancient news from a shadowy past. Still, as he stood staring into the dark, he thought he could feel something calling to him, pulling at him, inviting him to draw near.

He looked around, half expecting his mother to pop out from somewhere yelling at him to get home. Nothing. Nothing but that strange pull to step into the trees.

"What the hell," Ben said out loud, savoring the feel of the forbidden, grown-up word on his tongue. He strode toward the forest, acting out a confidence he didn't quite feel.

As he got closer, Ben saw that the trees and underbrush weren't quite as impenetrable as they looked from the road. He picked his way across thick patches of decaying leaves, falls of dried, dead branches, and thick ferns dripping with evening dew.

As he pushed further into the woods, the going was easier. The trees near the forest's heart were taller and so thick around he couldn't see what was on the other side of them. The heavy coverage left the ground nearly clear of underbrush, and Ben picked up his pace, thinking he might make it to the forest's center and back home again before anyone noticed he's been gone overly long.

He pause, his nose wrinkling as the smell of decaying flesh wafted over him. Dead animal, he thought. Must be something big, or very close, or both, to smell so strongly. He picked his way through a tangle of fallen trees and branches and froze.

"Mother of God," he swore softly, not even thinking about how his own mother would whip him with her kitchen towel for the blasphemy.

He was at the edge of a small clearing edged with brambles and bushes and more piles of broken tree limbs. Strewn amongst the foliage were the bodies of dozens of animals--squirrels, raccoons, birds, a small deer--arrayed as if someone had hung them up to decorate the clearing. Some were dried husks, mummified and ancient. Some seemed to be wrapped in sheer, gauzy white fabric. Some were moist and meaty, still decaying where they hung. This was where the smell was from.

Ben took shallow breaths, trying to inhale only through his mouth to lessen the odor. He shifted from foot to foot, uneasy, trying to decide whether to push on or head back the way he'd come.

He cocked his head, holding still and listening intently. Through the eerie silence of the deep woods he

thought he heard a voice.

Skirting the animal corpses, Ben moved further into the trees. The voice rose and swirled around him in a wordless song so beautiful it started tears flowing down his cheeks.

The song lured him on, but he was no longer afraid. He needed to find the source of that unearthly melody. He barely noticed the next clearing filled with more bodies, animals and humans mixed. He paused, but the song grew louder, more insistent, pulling him toward a pulsing, glowing light just visible through the trees.

A crescendo of inhuman notes rang around him as he stepped into another clearing. The forest's heart, the center of the woods. Before him, still singing her siren song, hung a glimmering, pearl white spider large as a horse. The song ended, and she reached for him, mouth open, mandibles protruding, and with never a thought for the forest myth he was about to become, Ben stepped into her embrace.

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