

A Walk in the Woods

By Stacie Garnett

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Timmy, hurry up and finish your breakfast. The bus will be here soon,” my mother said in her soft, sweet voice. She was a small woman with long, rich brown hair that hung down her back. She had large brown eyes that were alive and sparkling with love. You could always tell what she was thinking by looking into those caring eyes. My mother seemed so frail to me, but she had an inner strength that made her able to face any challenge. In that way she reminded me of a deer taking care of her fawn, and of course, that fawn was me.

“You don’t want to be late for your first day of fifth grade now, do you?” my father asked, leaning forward in his chair to look at me. He reminded me of a grizzly bear because he was so big and strong. At times he towered over me and looked fierce, but most of the time he was full of love.

I finished eating and put on my jacket. I wasn’t really looking forward to going back to school. It meant another long year of hard work. The only thing I had to look forward to was the weekends when I would be free to roam through the woods.

“Don’t forget your lunch, Timmy. I made you a special dessert today,” my mother said, handing me my lunch bag. She kissed me on my freckled cheek, messed up my red hair, and gave me a push toward the door.

“Come on, Rusty, let’s go,” I called to my Irish setter. She had been sitting in the corner watching me as I ate, and now she jumped up, eager to go. Rusty was my best friend in the whole world. She went with me everywhere and we did everything together. She understood me and I understood her. We were a perfect pair, always romping through the woods and finding frogs together. That was the worst thing about school: Rusty wasn’t allowed to come. It was like half of me was missing. It wouldn’t be so bad if I had some friends at school, but none of the kids really understood me, at least not like Rusty did.

Rusty walked with me to the bus stop every morning and was always waiting when I came back. During the days, she stayed with my father who was a logger and worked in the woods all day. We had to live near my dad’s work so we had a cabin in the woods—a place that most people would consider to be the middle of nowhere—where I felt completely at home. I liked it because we lived close to nature, with trees and animals all around us.

When Rusty and I started out this morning the sky was gray because it was so early, and the ground was still wet from dew. The air smelled like wet earth and pine trees, and I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with

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had never had any friends over to my house before. I was nervous about it, but I answered, "I guess that would be okay," not really sure if I meant it. I knew she meant well, but the truth was that I really didn't want to play with anyone but Rusty.

That afternoon I got off the bus as usual, but instead of Rusty there to meet me, I had other company. Katie was going to help me find my dog. Why I had let her come I had no idea, except that maybe she real-

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"I'm always nervous on the first day of school, too. I'm new this year."

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ly could help me find Rusty. Then everything would be back to normal, and I wouldn't have to worry about making new friends.

"You know, you're not the only one with problems," Katie said. "I don't have many friends, either. The girls don't like me because I'm a tomboy, and the guys don't like me because I'm a girl who is better than they are. All the guys are such show-offs and they think they're the best. They can't stand getting beaten, especially by a girl. But you're different. You never show off; in fact, you never say anything to anybody! You sit alone at lunch and never play with anyone. I'm sure that with a little practice you could be a half-decent baseball player." She jabbered on and on.

I just nodded in agreement. We turned off at the path heading toward the creek. "We'll start looking here," I managed to say. No sooner had I spoken than it started to rain. At first it was only a light drizzle, but then the thunder crashed and it started to pour. The rain was coming down in torrents that soaked us to the skin.

"Come on!" I yelled to Katie. "This way!" We could go to the cave that Rusty and I had found. It would give us shelter until the storm passed.

The pouring rain blinded us, but we ran on, across the muddy ground to the creek. The water was pounding hard and fast over the rocks and the sound of the rushing water roared in our ears. Raindrops pounded the surface of a puddle and made it ripple with life. Our shoes slogged across the wet leaves, and we scrambled over a fallen log. Finally we reached the cave. I pushed away the fallen branches at the mouth and we

crawled inside. Safe and dry at last, we stopped to catch our breath. We could see our warm breath in the dark cave like you can on cold winter mornings. The rain roared outside, but all was quiet inside the cave.

"This is turning into a real adventure!" Katie laughed. Then, in a deep, dramatic voice she added, "They were hot on the trail of the mysterious man who had stolen the treasure when suddenly it started to rain . . ."

"The heroes took shelter in a small cave," I broke in, "and it's lucky they did because someone was following them and would have killed them if they hadn't hidden just in the nick of time!"

Katie laughed, "You know, you're more fun than I thought—no offense!"

Pine needles paved our way as we crawled into the soft, safe cave. I leaned back against the rock. It was cold, jagged and rough; it had never felt the warmth of the sun. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness and we could see more clearly, we noticed something unusual about the back of the cave. I crawled over and saw that there was a hole leading to another cave. The light from the mouth of the cave didn't reach this far back, so the other cave was pitch-black. I felt like an explorer discovering strange new worlds.

"What if there's a bear in there?" Katie asked fearfully.

"Bears? In there? There aren't any bears around here. Of course, if there were, they'd be huge brown grizzlies with stained yellow teeth and sharp claws," I growled, arms extended and pretending to come after her.

"Aahhh!" Katie screamed.

"What's wrong? I was only kidding."

"I . . . I thought I heard something," Katie said.

"What? I didn't hear anything."

"It sounded like . . . like breathing. Aahhh! There it goes again!" Katie cowered against the wall. "There IS a bear in there!"

I had my back to the rear opening, immobilized. Those were breathing sounds! Just then I felt something cold and wet strike the back of my hand. I screamed and shot over to where Katie was crouched in a corner.

"It's going to eat us!" Katie cried.

As if on cue, a huge black muzzle poked its way through the hole. I pressed as far back against the wall as I could, terrified. Then a head started coming through. I held my breath, too scared to move.

"Rusty!" I said, relief washing over me. "It wasn't

a bear at all! It was just Rusty, and look—look what else is here!” I squeezed my head through the narrow passage and saw, squirming at Rusty’s feet—three new puppies! “She wasn’t lost; she just needed to find a place to have her litter.”

“Let me see,” Katie said, crawling closer. “Omigosh! Look how they’re all curled up together. They’re adorable! What are you going to do with them?”

“I don’t know.” It had all been so sudden. One minute I didn’t even have Rusty; then, an instant later, I had four dogs!

“I’ll probably keep one for myself and give the other two away. Do you want one? You can have any one you want, but you’ll have to wait until they’re weaned,” I said, proud of my knowledge of dogs.

“I can have one? Really? Thanks! That one over there seems friskiest. Can I have him? Of course I’ll have to ask my parents first but I’m sure they won’t mind,” Katie said, jumping up and down. “What are we going to do now? We’re still stuck here until the rain ends.”

“That’s okay. We can tell more adventure stories!”

“I would love to live in the woods,” Katie said.

“No you wouldn’t. You’re a girl, and girls hate to get dirty and muddy!” I looked at her. She had big mud spots on her knees, and her hair was sopping wet. “Yeah, I guess you would like it up here.”

Then Rusty and I, plus Katie and the three new puppies, boarded my ship and set sail for my dream world.