

The Call of The Forest

ლაშა ჩაჩუა

თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

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The school bell in the town of Willowbrook had not yet finished ringing to notify the end of the last class of the day, that Jon and Mattia were already standing in front of the gate of the schoolyard, preparing to go home.

- "At midnight"

- "No one can know!"

These were the last words the boys told each other before parting and going their own separate ways to their homes.

- "It can't be! They can't actually be Indians, besides, Anderson said that they lived many years ago. We might get expelled for this" – Such were the thoughts that kept Mattia at unease while the fifth grader was making his way home. Jon and Mattia had been good friends for a long time at school now. Mattia was the kind of person that easily got excited about adventure, while Jon was more of the civilized, diligent student but this recent occasion had piqued his curiosity as well.

That day both of the boys had heard their history teacher Benjamin Anderson speak about the original settlers of America and had decided to go searching for them in the taiga near their hometown. On arrival at his house Jon witnessed a miracle of his room to be unusually tidy. All of his clothes folded with the legs of only one pair of his trousers hanging from the edge of the ironing board. His mother was talking to the guest she had just received and his little sister was sitting at her drawing table. On her brother's entrance the girl jumped off the stool from the sudden surge of excitement, ran to Jon and wide opened the scrolled-up piece of cardboard paper before him.

- "What is this? Did you draw it?" asked Jon excitedly, making the little girl blush.

In the drawing Jon saw a bonfire blazing in the middle of a forest with a group of people being seated on the grass around it and the whole scenery was illuminated by a beam of light descending from the sky. Such an unexpected occasion made the boy's curiosity even more intense.

- "But how can it be?" he whispered to himself

Everything seemed to hint at the idea that in the dark Willowood forest enveloped in the air of mystery, there still resided the last surviving Apache Indian tribe.

-“What? Don’t you like it?” Asked the girl, a bit downhearted by her brother’s reaction.

-“Yes, it’s very beautiful.” Said Jon and kept on unpacking his backpack. Neither of the boys could sleep a wink that night. Mattia, awaiting his friend, was looking out the window of his room, hovering his eyes over the vast, moonlit field the boys intended to cross to get to the edge of the wood. The clock was about to chime one in the night, when Mattia heard the click of pebbles hitting and bouncing off the glass of his window. He ran to the windowsill, looked down and saw Jon waving his hand, signalling him to come down. The boy rolled into some clothes, strapped on his backpack and went to greet his friend. A humid breeze could be felt outside, the grass was imbued with night’s dew and the boy was happy about his choice to wear sportswear over shorts that night.

-“You’re late!” Reproached Mattia at his wingman.

-“So, quit whining and let’s go.”

-“I still don’t approve of this, Matt.”

-“Trust me we’ll see them!”

-“Remember that time on the field trip when you went missing and came back all dirty and tangled up in tumbleweeds saying a bison chased you? I have a pretty good reason to not trust you on this, but here we go anyway.”

Mattia’s house stood on higher ground at the edge of the town and looked over the entire settlement from above. It was fortified with a wooden hedge and on its opposite side of the town, stretched the vast field which led directly to the entrance of the forest. One after another, the boys squeezed through a breach in the hedge, descended on the slope and ended up right at the brink of the bare field. It was a peaceful autumn night. The frosty blusters of the approaching winter still hadn’t found their way into the heat and humidity remaining from the newly passed summer. The moon was shining upon the entire area and the grass kept crunching on getting stepped upon here and there. On their way to Willowood, the boys shared their most recent discoveries about Indians. After hearing about Jon’s little incident with his sister’s painting, Mattia said - Anderson mentioned their rites too. As it turns out, Indians could cause rain to fall in order to make the soil useful for gardening and harvesting. They would form a circle, each of them would place some kind of a drum before them and perform their rituals to connect with nature and spirits. They were as good hunters as warriors and were masters at wielding bow and arrow. When the boys almost ran out of the vast field, they took another glance at the road they had covered while they were carried away talking. At the other end of the field the house was standing on the hill like a dark, grim fortress, beyond which, out of a few windows of the sleeping town there was a dull candle light seeping out. – “All right, here we go!” said the boys in consonance, as they both sighed in the face of upcoming challenges. The area on their bodies illuminated by moon kept reducing as they neared the woods where the moonlight struggled to reach until their figures finally disappeared as they ventured into the depths of the wilderness. In the dark of the forest, only the contours of large figures like boulders and relatively large trees, could be seen. To make it possible for them to continue their search Mattia pulled up a lantern from his backpack that he had brought along. Mattia placed the lantern before him, Jon, with a pack of matches in his hand shielded the lantern from the

opposite side, struck the match and ignited the wick. In the matter of seconds, the light of the wick wafted the area and the surroundings came into sight.

White boulders, brackens rustling from the soft breeze and twigs all over the ground were what the surroundings consisted of. Owl's cooing was the only sound that pierced through the dark, mysterious ambience of the forest. Strangely, the breeze was stronger in the forest than it was in the open field and the boys noticed it got even stronger as they strove deeper into the woods.

- "How did you outrun a bison?"

- "You tell me. You are the best athlete in our school!"

- "At school, we don't race animals, Matt."

- "I think it's time to go back. There's nobody here." - Noted Jon worriedly, after a few yards of walking into the dense, dark forest

- "Wait, they have to be here."

- "Your hunch was wrong, just like on that field trip, admit it!"

The boys were caught up in the argument when a strong gust of wind blew and put out their light. Everything was once again devoured by darkness. As the boys' sight once again got accustomed, it was soon not as difficult to notice a tiny light shimmering afar.

- "Look, told you we were not alone here. Let's go check it out."

- "Wait! What's that sound?"

Right from the direction where the boys saw the light, the wind brought melodic sounds. The sounds were much like the ones emitted by the instrument of the Indians that Benjamin Anderson had spoken about that day. Jon and Mattia approached the light stealthily and saw it grow bigger as they closed in on it. Peeking from behind the white boulders they ran into near the light, the boys were taken aback by the scene before them. There was a bonfire blazing in the middle of the field and people like no one else the boys had ever met before, were gathering around it. The clothing of these strange people was also unlike anything else they had ever seen as well. It consisted of just a sarong to cover their lower body on the upper part of which they kept their bows strapped. Some of them who seemed to be older and respected among the members wore feathers on the side of their heads. On the bonfire there was a clay-made vessel filled with boiling water. Right beside it, they had placed an enormous tomb, the carving on which reflected two men standing around a rising flame with their arms held up in the sky. Soon two of the men approached the vessel from opposite sides, the others formed a circle around them, one of them sounded the instrument and the ritual was underway. As the two executioners performed their moves the steam coming out of the vessel went higher and higher and instead of dissipating in the air it transformed into a weak breeze and spread around in the forest as strong gusts of wind.

- "We've seen enough, it's time to go." Said Jon. "We can follow the wind, it gets weaker at the edge of the forest."

Once they emerged back outside of the woods the boys crossed the field once more, climbed back up the hill and parted at Mattia's house.

- "Ha! ha! ha! Oh, boys don't be ridiculous. No, no, that's absolutely impossible."

Such was Benjamin Anderson's response when our adventurers told him about what they had seen the night before.

That afternoon, as the final bell rang and students poured out of the school building, Jon and Mattia lingered behind by the tall oak tree at the far end of the yard. A warm breeze fluttered the leaves, though the air had been still moments before. The two youngsters stood in silence, neither sure what to say after the morning's mocking dismissal from Mr. Anderson.

Suddenly, a sound drifted on the wind. Faint at first, but unmistakable—the same reedy, pulsing melody they had heard deep in the forest. It hovered like a whisper just beneath the noise of chattering classmates and the clang of locker doors. Jon's head snapped up. "Did you hear that?" he asked.

Mattia didn't answer at first. He simply stared beyond the school fence, toward the direction of Willowood. His hand instinctively reached into his pocket, feeling the soft bristles of the feather he always carried.

-“I knew it,” he finally said, almost in a whisper.

Jon didn't argue. For once, he had no explanation.

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