

The Manor in the Woods

Our town was small, tiny even and everyone knew everybody. Not surprising considering it was basically made up of two families and a few unattached people that had moved to the neighborhood in their later years. Presumably to finally have some peace and quiet or to spend the remainder of their lives surrounded by nature.

Surrounded by nature we were: the landscape around town was quite picturesque but it had not yet been discovered by hordes of tourists from the city. Before I moved away from home for university I had utterly hated it there. You had to walk everywhere, to really get anywhere it took ages and without access to a car you were quite literally stranded. There was no public transportation and although it had been fun to build huts in the woods as children, as we grew older the nature certainly lost its appeal. But moving away from the place of your childhood really puts things into perspective and I can appreciate the town for what it is now.

A small stream cut through the woods close to the only bus stop that was only ever used by school buses. The townspeople called it a river but it wasn't really deserving of that name – always dried up or so full of leaves that you couldn't make out water anymore.

The woods stretched downhill and covered the valley to the north of town. The forest held a plethora of memories from my earliest childhood, building tree houses with my friends or finding the perfect stick to wrap the bread dough around, that my mother always made for bonfires at summer sleepovers.

But further into the woods, past the secret hideout we used to meet up and drink in during high school, past the swampy area that had swallowed more shoes than we liked to admit and past the overgrown thicket of stinging nettle that someone had fallen into when a rabid fox had chased us out of the area, there was a place of magic and mystery. No one was quite certain whether the manor actually existed or if we had imagined it all during one of our drunken benders.

Immediately after the night of our discovery, we had gone on a hunt for clues but we couldn't find our way back to the house in the forest. When we investigated in town, we uncovered an urban legend of sorts. We had been giddy and excited – there was a proper ghost story about our home! We went around the grandparents' houses and pieced together the story of the old man supposedly living in the manor. Someone claimed they'd seen him when they were younger. One of the grannies told us her mother had brought up a silhouette in the forest on every possible occasion. It could change forms at will and

lived its life in the skin of someone new every day. It felt like a fairy tale. But slowly, the excitement and giddiness had dwindled and eventually disappeared. We had grown up and moved on.

I was reminded of the house in the forest when I was home from university over New Year's. I had been to a party and only made it back home in the early hours of morning. The street light had already been turned off and there was a shimmer of light on the horizon when I opened the car door and got out. I couldn't make out the sign of the bus stop across the street because a dense fog rested in the air. The car door slammed shut and with bleary eyes I tried aiming the keys at the lock. That's when I heard the foot steps, quiet at first because of the soft ground past the bus stop among the trees but they grew louder when feet hit the street.

I turned around and pressed against the door of my car. My breath hitched and I looked around frantically, all the while trying to keep as still as possible. I thought about running – how many paces away were the stairs to my front door? Had my dad left the garage open? The steps came closer and finally, the sheet of fog in front of me parted and a short, heavy figure appeared. His hair was shorn off close to the scalp and the eyes pierced through the weather. The face was round, full cheeks and small lips that parted in a growling smirk. My left hand was fumbling for my keys that were stuck in the car lock.

I couldn't tear my eyes from the figure in front of me. He had stopped a few feet away from me and as I kept looking at his burning eyes, he never blinked once. I witnessed how – out of nowhere – the buzz cut started growing, the hair turned from blonde to brown to black. His eyes never left my face. When the hair was shoulder length, it suddenly turned curly and wound back up his head like a spring. While the hair was changing, his face also went through multiple transformations. His pupils never moved but the shape of his eyes changed, his face grew smaller, his cheeks sucked in, his chin became sharper. His ears also changed shape, smaller and bigger, closer to the head or further away. His hips broadened, the waist shrunk. The figure's presentation had noticeably shifted towards feminine. I felt dizzy, observing the display. The transformation seemed to happen imperceptibly slow but in quick succession at the same time. A weight settled on my chest, gripping my heart and blocking my throat. I could not tear my eyes away.

Eventually, everything settled back to how he had appeared the very first moment I had made him out in the fog. One corner of his mouth pulled up in a teasing grin that whispered a challenge in my direction. Emotional chaos stormed inside me and I felt hot tears burning down my cheeks.

My fingers finally found the key just as he stretched out a hand towards me. I was rooted to the spot, unable to move. My mind was racing, struggling to decide between wanting to figure out his true shape

and not making assumptions. His lips never moved but I could make out a voice, or maybe it was just my thoughts. *Come and find me in the woods.* I knew the manor in the forest was his.

Then he was gone, in the blink of an eye. Paralyzed, I stayed leaning against the car. My vision blurred behind the tears and I felt a mountainous pressure settle on my lungs. The fog was slowly clearing and the shimmer of light on the horizon had spread. The wind gently rustled the empty twigs and branches of the trees across the street.

I couldn't fall asleep even though I had stayed up all night at the party and was exhausted. My mind kept replaying my encounter with the shapeshifter. I found myself thinking about the freedom the individual must feel in not being bound to one form. Being able to change oneself from one moment to the next must be incredibly liberating and daunting. Trying on new shapes and sizes, gauging other people's reactions and being able to immediately change whenever one feels uncomfortable in their own skin – a dream, really. The sense of heaviness never wore off, it pressed me down in the sheets and held my heart gripped tightly.

When I got up, the day seemed gray and dreary. The foggy encounter still consumed my thoughts and although I usually pushed these feelings away, telling myself I was doing okay and I didn't need to change, suddenly the realization that I really wasn't doing okay was omnipresent in my mind.

I found myself wandering into the forest, not paying any attention to where I was going, just putting one foot in front of the other. The trees rustled, the wet ground crunched and squished but I just kept on walking. My feet carried me towards my destination, finding the way I had been searching for so many years ago. It was so simple and the facade of the manor glistened in the morning light, welcoming me with its warm glow and making it hard to comprehend I had been lost in the woods for all this time. As soon as I reached the solid wooden door I raised a hand to knock. The sound against the heavy door was all-consuming. My ears rang when it slid open and I stepped inside the manor. The interior was vast but it did not take long for small steps to become audible. The door had shut behind me.

A short, heavy-set man with a receding hairline of unnaturally dark hair for his apparent age materialized in the doorway before me. His gait was slow and careful, his posture slouched. I was once again confused. I started asking a question but stopped before I got a full word out. The man looked at me and I found myself once again staring into the piercing eyes that had captivated me during our last encounter. His lips curled up in a smile, the resemblance to his earlier expression

uncanny – despite the different outer appearance. A storm raged inside of me while I stared down at him. He was serene – calm as a millpond.

His stature had no resemblance to the entity I had come in contact with before. There was no wild expression of freedom and possibility, no adherence to any concepts of beauty and no apparent desire to achieve eternal youth and vigor. He seemed old and frail but headstrong and assured at the same time.

Turbulent emotions marked my expression. I was struggling to form a coherent thought in the midst of tempestuous rapids flooding my mind. Unmoving, I tried my hardest to compose myself, while he was centered and confident. I took a shaky, unsteady breath in. I wanted what he had: the ability to be my true self. I didn't want to be the prettiest or the most handsome. Even if, like to him, every possibility was open to me, I would just want to feel comfortable in my own skin.

He just looked at me, his eyes piercing me with a sense of pride, serenity and comfort. He radiated authenticity and understanding. I breathed out, narrowing my eyes until I finally closed them. In the darkness of my mind I still saw his form changing amidst wallowing fog. My eyes opened to find the short old man in front of me, his eyes containing a mischievous sparkle while he seemed utterly at peace. He didn't need the wild liberty of possibilities and he didn't need to be any more than an urban legend to the town at the edge of his forest. The manor in the woods was his realm and he was the old man inhabiting it, paying the town a visit every now and again. Every wrinkle on his body, his bent back and his fragile tread were beautiful. This was his true shape and it was perfect.