

2021

## John is in the Woods

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### Recommended Citation

Webb, Alexandria (2021) "John is in the Woods," *Calliope*: Vol. 33 , Article 29.  
Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol33/iss1/29>

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# John is in the Woods

Alexandria Webb

Mom does not know that John is in the woods.

I have decided I will tell her if she asks. I promised John I wouldn't, but I don't want to lie to her. She seems so sad, now. She no longer smiles at me the same way she used to; there is something different about her. I think if John saw her now, he'd agree that I should tell her – but only if she asks.

I know I'll get in trouble when I tell her. John and I aren't allowed that far into the woods. Whenever John asks why, Mom always says, "It's dangerous. I wouldn't be able to keep an eye on you boys." John always rolls his eyes when she says this, but only if her back is turned. I think it's a bold move; I would never disrespect Mom like that. He has always been wilder than me, the result of his 12 years versus my 8. He says I should "grow a pair," a line he heard from watching TV.

I never understand why Mom says the woods are dangerous. They have never felt that way. The trees watch over us, the sunlight warms us, the paths between bushes guide us, and the flowers lead us home. Peace grows in the forest; you don't have to listen to everyday nonsense. Mom always lets things get to her that shouldn't. The woods would cure that.

John told me once that the reason Mom says the woods are dangerous is because a serial killer lurks in them. I know he was just trying to scare me. He always tries to do that, but it stopped working after a while. Mom told me that responding just eggs him on, so now I only respond to things I am interested in.

Mom has begun wishing I would respond more. She has taken me to all kinds of doctors that ask me how I feel, try to have a conversation with me, and even ask me about John. I know

they are trying to egg me on, so I don't respond. It's better that way because I don't get upset anymore, at least not that anyone can see. I haven't spoken in almost a year, just because I choose not to.

But I would respond to Mom if she asked me where John was.

I know I didn't when she first asked me, but that's because I didn't like the way she asked me. The look in her eyes was not friendly, not loving. She was too emotional, and I could tell she was angry with me; it shook in her voice when she asked, "Blake, where is John?" Not Blakey, honey, or sweetheart. Blake. That upset me, so I didn't respond. I figured she was just trying to egg me on.

Mom drinks. At first she tried to hide it, but now she leaves out the bottles. She swallows pills that she tells me calm her, even though I never ask why she takes them. I tried sipping from one of the bottles once, and it was like fire in my throat. It makes her cry, and it tastes awful, so why does she do it?

She has a lot of male friends. She brings them over, but usually they are gone by the time I wake up for breakfast. The only time one of them stayed that long she ended up kicking him out because he called me a freak at the breakfast table. He didn't like that I was staring at him and that I didn't talk. He could have just asked me to stop.

When Mom shut the door behind the man, she turned and stared at me for a minute, but when I met her eyes she looked away. She does that a lot. That morning, she said she didn't feel well and threw away her food, locking herself in her room for the rest of the day. I continued eating, enjoying the quiet, the smell of bacon in the air; Mom taught John and me not to be wasteful.

One night, I came out of my room to see Mom sitting on the couch in the living room. She had one of those bottles in her hand, her pale, skinny fingers gripping the neck like she was trying to kill it. She seemed to vibrate where she sat, and it was very dark. The television was off even though she was staring at it intensely, frozen yet shaking. The sharp scent of her drink filled the air. The only bit of light was what just made it through the window from the streetlamp

outside, and something about its fake, fuzzy rays did not sit well with me. Maybe that is why Mom seemed so upset; she had to look at fake light instead of real light.

I started to get more upset, watching her from the hallway. What was wrong with her? Could she not sense me standing there? Did she forget about me? I quickly rushed over and flipped on the light switch, and when I did, Mom jumped upright in her seat and screamed, dropping the bottle on the floor. She stared at me with wide, bloodshot blue eyes, her gray-streaked brown hair knotted and stringy. I waited for the fear on her face to melt away when she realized it was me, but she continued to stare at me with that same expression, her mouth slightly open. I didn't like that.

Finally, she spoke. "Blake – " She snapped her mouth shut, letting my name hang there. I think she could see from my face that whatever she would say, I wouldn't respond to. Her expression had upset me. Her shoulders dropped in defeat. "What are you doing?"

Silence. The response we both expected.

I could feel her eyes on me as I went into the kitchen and got a glass of juice. Even though she had turned the television on, the whistling of *The Andy Griffith Show* filling the room, she watched me, sipping from her bottle. I was watching her, too, waiting for an expression I could like. I think she knew that.

Later that night, I heard the front door close. Mom had left. It was an odd time to go somewhere, but I never question my mom. Hours later I woke up to the sound of the front door opening, and since I slept with my door open, I could see down the hall to her silhouette in the doorway, the streetlamp lighting the road behind her. Water was dripping from her, making a soft tapping sound on the wood floor. She was only a shadow.

I watched her slowly pull out things from her jacket pockets, her hands obviously shaking. The objects were big and heavy looking, and they made loud thuds on the table next to the door. She used two hands to lift them. When they were all out, she untied what looked like a rope from her waist, spending a long time trying to undo the knot. After, she unbuttoned and unzipped the jacket, and it made a wet, plopping sound when she let it fall to the floor. Still she

stood there, a shadow, the door open behind her. She would yell at John or me if we did that. I wanted to roll my eyes.

That night, while I pretended to sleep, I felt her come into my room and stare down at me for a long while. She smelled like the river on the far side of town. Her breathing was so loud, like she had been running. Right when I was about to open my eyes to let her know I was awake, she leaned down and kissed me on the cheek.

That was when I decided I would tell her where John was – if she asked.

The next morning, I saw that the heavy things she had taken out of her pockets and left on the table were large stones. The thick rope that had been tied around her waist sat coiled on top of them, still slightly wet. I was staring at the strange items when she came into the kitchen, and when I looked from them to her, she met my eyes straight on. She pressed her lips together for a second, opened her mouth, and then shut it again. The rocks and rope were gone by the time I left for school.

That was a month ago. She still hasn't asked about John, and in a few weeks it will be a year since the first time she tried. Yesterday, I got tired of waiting, and while she was at work I went to see John. Visiting him in the woods has become my favorite pastime, but I can only do it when Mom is away. She would ruin the peace that exists there.

It has been fascinating to watch the forest change; so much happens in a year. In autumn, all the bushy green plants from summertime explode into fiery colors, which die in different shades of brown, falling onto the forest floor and making the air smell soft and heavy. The sun begins to shine through the branches of the trees less and less, hinting at its goodbye. In winter, the cold air takes my breath and swirls it into the clouds far above, all the while hardening the earth. Snow falls in white tufts, covering the ground in layers of sheets, lining the hard edges of every branch, bush, and even the smallest of leaves. The snow muffles all sound. In winter, I miss the sun.

In spring, my nose runs, and it rains too much. But the flowers begin to grow in blues, purples, and yellows, painting the woods and making the air smell like perfume. The sun gives them life, lifting them up. Some stick around in the summer, while others are crushed beneath

the heavy moss and vines, weeds that become strong in the hot, sticky air. One beautiful daisy has fought and fought, and lives inside John.

When John slipped and fell over the cliffside almost a year ago, I was looking over the edge of it with him. He didn't scream, but made a sort of "Oh!" sound when he fell, and then there was a heavy thud, like Mom's rocks on the table. Then nothing. I called his name once, and when he didn't answer I tried a few more times. I could see his hand through the leaves of the trees that grew at the bottom of the cliff, lying on a bed of moss. It didn't move, even when I called his name. I felt a little sick after that, so I sat at the edge of the cliff and watched the leaves sway in the breeze, listening to the quiet. When I felt the first drop of rain hit the tip of my nose, I decided I had better head home. Mom would be worried.

When I got home that night, the house was painted blue from the police lights. Mom cried when she saw me, and hugged me tight. Then she looked over my shoulder and called John's name as a policeman came up next to her, staring at me with his head tilted to one side. "Where's your brother, son?" he asked me.

I didn't like him calling me son. I stayed quiet.

"Where were you at, boy?"

Silence.

Mom turned to stare at me, and she no longer looked happy to see me. She looked angry and scared, and she was starting to cry again. "Blake, where is John?" she demanded, her voice shaking.

I pressed my lips together like she does when she is upset. She should have known better than to use that tone with me.

The first few days after John fell, I couldn't see him. Too much was happening at the house with Mom being upset and the police officers asking me too many questions, getting frustrated when I didn't respond. They were mad at me for not helping them, and for the fact that it had rained in the woods. They couldn't find John, and the rain made the dogs useless. When I finally went back to the woods, I carefully picked my way down a barely visible deer path on the

cliff side, and there he was. He smelled awful, not natural, and looked like he had grown. It was disgusting.

I didn't come back for a long time after that. I started to think about the sound he made when he fell, and wondered if I should actually tell Mom about it. But then I think about John promising me not to tell her about going to the woods that day, and I remember the other times I've tattled on him. He's hurt me for doing that. I don't think he'll hurt me now, but I am still scared of him. I haven't yet "grown a pair."

When I did go back to the woods to see John, some of his fingers were missing, and he was beginning to look like the skeleton in Mrs. Robert's health class. It was around Halloween then, so I thought that was fitting. Next time I came, he was buried under the snow. I thought about digging him out since it was so cold, but my hands started to go numb, so I went home.

By the time flowers bloomed, most of John had disappeared or been moved by animals. I found his skull halfway buried next to a big oak further from where he had fell. The daisy was growing where his right eye used to be, and the white of its petals was so pretty against the dark shadow it grew out of. Somehow, in these bright months of summer, the daisy still lives. At just the right time of day, the natural, warm rays of the sun shining through the branches of the trees will land on the daisy, setting its yellow center on fire. I think Mom would like it; she loves daisies.

If Mom asks me where John is, I will tell her. Until then, it's nice to sit in the woods with him. He's a lot quieter now, and the woods are peaceful.