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Gus

The morning light streamed through the trees and caught a pair of chipmunks at play.

Lying on my side and still a little sleepy, I watched them chase each other through the dried leaves and wished I could join in their game. They played so easily and without a care in the world. Then I realized where I was—far from home and not ready

If Roses Were Blue

to go back. And what about that fairy lady, the lady of light? She knew all about me. Or had I been dreaming after all?

One of the chipmunks snatched up an acorn, chirped at its partner, and scrambled



away. The other

darted off as

I stood to

stretch

and brush the

leaves off of me.

Maybe I can find a sign that proves she really was here, I thought, as I looked over my forest bedroom. “There must be something,” I said aloud and shuffled through the leaves.

“Hey, that’s my property you’re kickin’ around!” shouted a voice from behind me.

Startled, I turned and took a couple steps back. I didn’t see anyone.

“Who’s there?” I asked a little shaky.

Out from the shadows, atop an old tree stump, appeared a boy about my age and size. He wore blue jeans torn at the knee and almost new tennis shoes. A light green t-shirt hung below his faded jean jacket. A patch of dark brown hair slid across his forehead as he struck a defiant pose, daring me to move or to speak. Yet, somehow he didn't appear quite as tough as he may have wanted me to think.

"Gus is the name. This is my meetin' place, and you're trespassing," he said firmly.

"Well, uh, I'm sorry. I was just tired and I had been walking for a long time and, gosh, I didn't know."

Gus stood a little taller. I think he knew he was making me nervous.

He said, "Well, that's okay, I guess. It's not like you were hurtin' anything. I don't use this place much anymore, anyway. Have you got a name?"

“Chris,” I said, thinking what a silly way to ask for someone’s name.

Gus jumped off the stump and walked toward me. “So, what are you doing out here anyway?”

“Oh, uh, just going for a walk,” I said and quickly added, “to my aunt’s house in Woodside.”

I certainly wasn’t going to tell him why I left and, besides, I knew I would be going there sometime. I liked her a lot. She listened to me and just really seemed to care. Anyway, I didn’t plan it at first, but I *was* going in that direction.

“Awful early to be going for a walk,” Gus said, narrowing his eyes, as though he didn’t really believe me. “And what do you have in that bag?”

Gus reached for my bag with a stick he carried like a sword, but I was quicker. “This

is my property,” I stated firmly, surprised at my own courage.

“Okay, okay,” said Gus. “Just seems like a lot to take on a walk, uh, I mean, to your aunt’s house.”

“Well, it’s not,” I said, clutching my bag tightly.

“DROP IT!” yelled Gus moving quickly toward me.

I dropped the bag, alarmed by the sharp tone of his voice, and stepped away. With his stick, he picked up the bag by one strap and tilted it so my things began to fall out. Before I could ask what he thought he was doing with my stuff, out slithered a rather large snake.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed.

“You have to be careful out here. Could be poisonous, but this one’s just an ol’ garter snake. It won’t hurt you,” he said.

I stared at the snake as it quickly zig-zagged through the leaves and disappeared. Gus added, “Besides, it’s just a little thing.”

“A little thing!?” I asked, looking at him as if he were crazy.

“Yeah, it’s only about 12 inches from end to end.”

A snake’s a snake as far as I was concerned.

“In India there are snakes over 12 feet long,” Gus stated with authority.

“Lucky I’m not going that far,” I mumbled.

I could feel Gus staring at me.

He said, “Looks to me like you could use some help gettin’ to your aunt’s house.”

“Oh, uh, no. That’s okay. I’ll be fine. I can take care of myself.”

As I gathered my things, shaking each one carefully, I glanced toward Gus. He was smiling.

Gus

“Leaves,” I said in response to his amused look.

“Yeah, sure,” said Gus, still smiling. Then, taking this whole matter to heart, he said, “Well, I just happen to be going in that direction and I agree to be your guide.”

This time I didn’t disagree. Actually, I was a little relieved.