

A photograph of a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a dappled light effect on the forest floor. The text is overlaid on the image.

The Deer Man of Wild Woods

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Two days before Thanksgiving, six weeks after his thirty-eighth birthday, one month after being laid off from his job, fifteen days after his mother's funeral, eleven hours after finishing the move back into his childhood home, and three minutes after awakening from a disturbing dream, Gregory Goode looked out of the front window and saw a whitetail deer standing on a neighbor's front lawn.

In the few seconds it took him to realize it was a statue, one of many decorations that would adorn that yard in the coming weeks, an episode of strange enchantment occurred. A series of pictures flashed through his mind and he seemed to feel the sensations that went along with them. It was only a daydream, but it was so real. It was enchantment.

Gregory had never seen a deer wander out of the nearby woods before. Not in the eighteen years he had lived in the house before going off to college, nor in twenty years of weekly visits to his widowed mother. But it wasn't surprising that there might be deer in that parcel of trees and brush just three blocks away.

Wild Woods everyone called it. Not because it was a wilderness, but because it was situated alongside the Josiah Wild Elementary School which, as every pupil learned in first grade, was named after a founding member of the city's school system.

For as long as Gregory or anybody else could remember, the woods had been a source of controversy.

Local nature lovers always stood up for the woods and talked about how lucky everyone was to have such a pristine spot in their midst.

The school's gym teachers, and a lot of others who wanted more and better sporting activities, thought the woods were a nuisance, standing as they did in an ideal spot for a new baseball diamond or a football field.

The PTA had a highly vocal contingent that saw the woods as a hazard. It was only a matter of time, they raged, until some child would be dragged off into the bushes by some pervert and then everybody would be sorry that they'd left those woods standing unfenced and unguarded.

The kids had their own opinions. Wild Woods was a mysterious place, and everybody talked about the Deer Man. Nobody knew if it was a real man, or some sort of half-deer-half-human entity. But whatever it was, it was dangerous and if you looked toward the woods at just the right time of evening or just at dawn you might catch a glimpse of him looking out of the woods, watching the people in the neighborhood, waiting for his chance.

The Deer Man was never mentioned in all the meetings the city held to determine the fate of Wild Woods, and after years of arguing there had been a compromise. The school got to improve the less woodsy section right next to the building for a multi-purpose athletic field. The dense part of the woods that extended for half a mile beyond the schoolyard was fenced in to protect the children without, and to preserve the wilderness within.

Long before the fences had gone up, Gregory and his friends had been forbidden from entering the woods, but that didn't stop them. One summer evening when he was ten, Gregory had left the house just after dinner, supposedly to go over to his friend Billy's, but actually to meet Billy and their friend Larry at the school for an adventure in the woods.

Gregory had slipped a flashlight into his pocket, knowing that it would be dark under the dense canopy of leaves, even though there was still some daylight. Larry brought some matches and a handful of Kools he'd sneaked from the cigarette box on his parents' coffee table, and Billy brought a roll of Pepp-O-Mint Lifesavers to cover up their cigarette breath.

Years later, Gregory couldn't recall anything they had talked about or done besides smoking, but sometimes when the power failed and he had to use a flashlight he would recall leading the way through the darkening woods to a little clearing where a fallen tree provided a perfect place to sit. And every now and then when someone lit up a cigarette, the smoke carried a memory that filled his lungs and heart and he could feel himself with Billy and Larry sitting alongside him on the decaying log, trying hard not to cough, taking in the first breath of manhood.

Those thoughts flashed to mind as soon as he saw the deer. Then came the reverie in which the animal became real. He felt an instant need to make sure it got safely back to the woods.

Within his fantasy, he experienced it all. He put on his jacket and grabbed a loaf of cinnamon raisin bread from the kitchen counter. He stepped out the

front door and began unwrapping the bread. He took out a slice as he slowly moved across the lawn and extended his hand. The deer met his eye, but didn't move.

Quickly and quietly, Gregory moved across the street and stopped on the sidewalk in front of the neighbor's house. Then slowly, with a smooth motion, he swung his arm in the deer's direction and let go of the slice of raisin bread.

The deer started, and Gregory was afraid it might bolt. But some force stronger than fear made the deer stay and shift its gaze from Gregory to the slice of bread that now lay on the frosty grass about two feet in front of it.

For the first time now, Gregory could see that this was a young buck, just past the fawn stage with a few faded spots and buds of antlers beginning to protrude. The deer studied the bread for a few seconds, then took one hesitant step and lowered its head for a sniff. Two more slow steps brought it to the spot and it consumed the bread in a single bite.

Gregory had a second slice ready and let it drop as he backed off a few steps. Now seemingly less timid, the deer approached and gobbled up the offering. Gregory tore the next slice in half, dropped it and moved a few more feet along the sidewalk. Again, the deer moved cautiously forward and took the bread.

Repeating his actions with smaller bits of bread to make the loaf last, Gregory proceeded backward along the sidewalk, grateful that he and the deer had the street to themselves. For some reason there was no one about, no kids on the way to school, no drivers out starting their cars. There was no noise at all, in fact, except the clicking of hooves along the snow-dusted pavement and the scuffling of Gregory's own bedroom slippers as he made his way toward the corner.

Once they rounded the turn he felt more relaxed and confident of his mission's success. At least now if the deer were to become startled and run off, it would be heading toward the woods. He looked over his shoulder as he passed the corner house. The street ahead was clear and empty. "One block down, two to go," he whispered.

They were moving more quickly now, Gregory efficiently tearing bits of bread with bare fingers that were beginning to feel the cold but not yet ready to stiffen, as if independently aware of the urgency of the errand. Man and deer progressed along the block toward the school. That would be the trickiest part, Gregory realized—getting past the school.

He felt the air change as they moved past the long row of houses toward the school and the woods beyond.

The wind had always felt different along this part of the walk. Mornings on his way to school it would intensify as he approached the building. In winter he would have to pull his coat tighter around him. In late spring, when the weather grew warm and the days until summer vacation seemed interminable, a blanket of hot moisture would seem to envelop him and he would wonder how he was ever going to make it through the day without melting.

Today, intent on his mission, his shoulders shrugged off the wind as his fingers had dismissed the cold. He focused on the bits of bread he was dropping faster now, as he moved toward the curb and the street that stood between him and the school. He had made this crossing hundreds of times in his life, but never backwards, and never being followed by a deer.

Gregory looked both ways and found, miraculously, no traffic. He moved on, still concerned about what could happen when they reached the school itself. What if some child looked out the window and saw the deer? What if dozens of children suddenly came streaming from the building to see the deer close up? What if, close as they were to the woods, the deer became confused and ran not to the safety of the trees, but through the streets where it would become lost and even more terrified? What if, after coming all this way, he were to fail?

But even as he had the thoughts, Gregory discovered that they had passed the school, their journey uninterrupted. Now he had only one last impediment: a ten-foot high chain link fence.

Although he hadn't come this way since boyhood, he figured there was a gate somewhere, probably near the corner of the fence just beyond the sidewalk's end. He began to feel his way along a dirt path worn by generations of youngsters who had defied their parents' warnings and ventured into the forbidden woods.

Just a few more feet, he thought as he reached into the wrapper and his fingers closed on the last slice of bread. He glanced over his shoulder to see that he was now only a couple of steps away from the entry gate, which was chained shut and padlocked.

Now what? he thought, and as quickly as he asked, found an answer. A few feet away he spotted some loosened links along the fence post. Keeping

one eye on the deer and holding the last slice of bread in his hand, he sidled over to the loose spot and gave it a shove.

Sure enough, the entire row of metal links had been pried open. An army of boys intent on rule-breaking could have passed through the gap, and over the years probably had.

He leaned against the section of fence to keep it open and looked around for a stick or something to hold it in place.

But while his head was turned he felt a tug as the young buck tore off most of the slice of bread and dashed past him. He caught a fleeting glimpse of white tail amid a cluster of branches as the deer ran into the woods and out of sight.

Gregory stood there for a moment, staring at the crust of bread in his fingers, now aware of the numbing cold that was quickly overtaking him. He shifted his glance to the spot where the deer had disappeared and saw that it was there again, meeting his gaze with the fearless visage of one who is where he deserves to be.

Gregory found himself back at the window, looking at a statue. The scene had lost its ethereal quality. Now there were cars starting and children on their way to school. The statue stood unflinching on the lawn and as Gregory met its gaze, another episode occurred that was not enchantment. It was a memory. It was real, and as painful now as when it happened.

That evening of fun with Billy and Larry was not the only time he had ventured into the woods. There was another time. The last time.

The summer after he graduated sixth grade had looked to be a lonely one. Billy's family was going up north to his grandparents' cottage for the summer. Larry and he were each invited to go along for a month and keep Billy company, but Gregory's parents didn't want him to leave home for that long. Instead, Larry went for two months. Gregory seemed doomed to spending his time alone, or worse yet, with his parents.

Then the local Knights of Columbus had their annual Fourth of July carnival on the church grounds and his parents dragged him along. He managed to break away from them by offering to try to win his mother a prize at the sideshow games. While waiting to try his luck at the ring toss, he became reacquainted with the Wilkinson twins.

Matt and Mark Wilkinson lived just three doors down, but they had gone to Catholic school, so he hadn't seen much of them. Perhaps because they were the only twins in the neighborhood, they had always seemed special. And there was an element of mystery and danger about them. They had been taken to the police station when they got caught shoplifting.

Now they were all going to attend the same junior high and Matt suggested that they could walk to school together. Gregory felt honored to be welcomed into their company.

During the next weeks the three boys made frequent trips to the woods.

"Have you ever been there at night?" Mark asked one afternoon.

Gregory had told them of his trip there with Billy and Larry, highlighting the smoking to prove he was cool.

"That's nothing," Matt said. "You should come with us when it's really dark. That's when you can see the Deer Man."

They made a plan to slip out of their homes that very night. The twins had it all worked out and told Gregory what to do. They all had ground-floor bedrooms so it would be easy.

Before his father came home from work and while his mother was busy fixing dinner, Gregory prepared. As the twins had instructed, he popped the screen out of his bedroom window and hid it in the closet. Then he ran a bar of soap around the window frame so that it would open and close noiselessly. He shut the window to keep the bugs out and closed the drapes. Then he went out into the yard and made sure there were no branches or debris under the window that would make a sound or cause injury when he lowered himself out.

It was so easy to go to bed as he usually did, close his door and pretend to sleep until he heard the late news come on. He made a silent exit through his window and met the twins at the prearranged spot near the corner, just outside the circle of light from the street lamp.

The twins had been right—that previous excursion was nothing compared with exploring the woods in the dark of night. Every rustle of leaves, every crack of a twig brought a thrill. Even when the noise they thought might be the Deer Man turned out to be a raccoon, Gregory's heart leapt.

But whenever he recalled the adventure, it was always eclipsed by its aftermath.

Within minutes of Gregory's silent escape from the house, his mother had come into his room to check on him. Of course, Gregory had no way of

knowing that she always did. Panic set in when she found his bed empty and the window wide open. She screamed, and his father came running. He calmed his wife's fears with a simple statement: "Those damn Wilkinson twins."

The boys returned to find that a stealthy re-entry was unnecessary. The twins' father was standing on the porch with his arms folded. He didn't say a word as Matt and Mark filed past him into the house.

Gregory's parents were both in the front yard, his father pacing up and down the driveway, his mother standing on the front walk twisting the fabric of her bathrobe belt into a tight ball. They hustled him into the house and it began.

Next morning, the twins confronted Gregory on the sidewalk in front of his house. Gregory had been forbidden from venturing farther for the rest of the summer. The twins made it clear that they blamed Gregory for whatever punishment they had to endure.

"If he wasn't such a mama's boy," Matt said deliberately to Mark.

"If his mama didn't have to come to his room and tuck him in and give him a kissy," Mark said to Matt. Then they both turned to him.

He had never seen such hatred in any person's eyes, let alone a child. And there were two identical sets of eyes sending identical messages of rage.

"Does baby Gregggy want a kissy now?" Matt said. The two of them made kissing noises and began moving toward him. He fled into the house.

Gregory's punishment was simple. In addition to being confined to the house and yard, he was never to socialize with Matt and Mark again. That was easy enough because they didn't want anything to do with him and he was now scared to death of them.

For a while it was easy to be good. He had never seen his parents like they had been that night and he never wanted to see it again. He spent the last two weeks of summer vacation alone in the backyard or in his room. Then it was back-to-school time.

He was kind of looking forward to starting junior high. It was a new beginning and anything would be better than the previous weeks of isolation. Plus Billy and Larry would be back, and there would be other friends to be made.

The new school was ten blocks away and he thought about what fun it would have been to make the trip with the twins if they hadn't gotten caught. Together they would have told all kinds of stories, and maybe even sneaked

a smoke. But he knew it wasn't to be and made the trip alone, hoping that the twins weren't lying in wait for him.

No such luck. Matt and Mark had arrived at school ahead of him, recovered from their own punishments and ready for new adventures.

On the sidewalk in front of the school building on that first day of classes, the story of their night in the woods was being told as a saga from which Gregory was mysteriously absent.

The twins captivated their classmates with a tale of how they spent the night in the woods by themselves. That is, until some girls from the high school came running up to them. They had been frightened by the Deer Man and their clothes were ripped so that you could see everything.

When the twins spotted Gregory, the taunting began.

"Well if it isn't Gregory Goody-Goody, professional mama's boy."

"His mama still has to tuck him in every night."

"Maybe because he wets the bed."

The other boys in the group chuckled and stared at him. The girls giggled and looked down at the sidewalk. He walked past them into the school building.

What had been a lonely summer turned into an even lonelier fall. By dismissal time on the first day of school, nobody wanted anything to do with Gregory Goody-Goody. The only boys who didn't actually shun him were Billy and Larry, and that relationship had been altered too. Over the summer they had bonded into a team and Gregory was the odd man out. The friendship quickly deteriorated into simple nods of acknowledgement when they passed in the halls.

During that first year of junior high what began as a taunt seemed to become reality. Somehow the fear of what might happen if he stepped out of line became more of a force than the desire to fit in. He began spending afternoons and Saturdays at the library, where it didn't matter if nobody talked with you because nobody was supposed to talk.

At home he tried to be nice to his parents. He helped his mother with the cleaning and the shopping and spent evenings watching TV with her and his father. The pattern continued until the day before Thanksgiving, when his father had the first of the three heart attacks that would take his life before the year was out.

Again Gregory brought himself back into the present, studying the statue on the lawn across the street.

The deer would not maintain its solitary vigil for long, Gregory remembered. That particular neighbor loved to decorate. Soon the deer would be joined by a Styrofoam Frosty the Snowman, some plastic inflatable penguins, and a heavy-duty cardboard Santa complete with sleigh and reindeer. Mary and Joseph and the three wise men would also appear, sheltered by a portable wooden lean-to and ultimately joined by the baby Jesus in a milk crate manger. It was too much.

He shook his head and the shaking seemed to resonate throughout this body. It was all too much. Too much clutter on the neighbor's lawn, too much to think about before even having a cup of coffee. The holidays, the recent loss of his mother, the decision to move back home to resolve his financial troubles, and the memories. Just way too much.

The memories were the worst of all, and the holidays amplified his misery. He dreaded those few weeks every year, and this year more than ever. The long, dark nights, the bitter cold, the feeling of aching aloneness amid the crowds of people intent on celebration. Then, after the season that everyone else found so festive would come the New Year and the time for resolution.

Resolution. The word came into his mind like a whisper of wind, like the wind that seemed to change as he crossed that last street toward the woods in his daydream, and as he had in life so many times. He looked once more into the eyes of the statue and deliberately spoke the word.

"Resolution." And he remembered the true meaning: not a promise, but a decision.

And it dawned on him that the days ahead of him were merely that—days. Days were made up of hours and hours were made up of minutes. Each minute was a bit of the future in itself, a future built on the lessons and mistakes of the moments gone by. And in each minute he could make a decision that would carry him forward.

He thought fondly about the daydream one last time before making the decision to get on with the day. He would make himself some coffee and toast. Raisin bread toast.