

Janie

Arnold, Janie's grandfather, liked to tap his fingers on the table; he drummed a scattered, fast paced beat. The fingers of his left hand were wrapped around a cup of coffee and sometimes it was mixed with an 'eye opener'. His thumb held down the editorial page of the neighborhood newspaper, and he read it intently.

Janie always knew when he fumbled upon a hard word. The beat of his fingers would cease, and she would see him crinkle up his nose in thought, searching for the definition in his head. Sometimes he would ask for help, sometimes not. Janie didn't mind either way. Arnold lived on his own until recently. His house was in the run-down area near downtown, but Janie still liked it, especially in comparison to her uniformed house in the suburbs, where he was relegated now.

It wasn't off the beaten path of downtown, the one that you drove into in the city, where skyscrapers made her knees buckle, and she avoided dirty water dripping down from overhangs; his house was in a cutesy pocket of a town, where English Majors in turtle necks opened their journals and drank coffee at the corner donut shop, and wondered why the sweet old man didn't hire someone to chip off the old paint and put on a fresh coat, maybe a mocha-vanilla color, on the old charming house.

Arnold had an air of mystery to many of his neighbors, something Janie coveted. All her neighbors knew her, and consequently, what happened to her.

Arnold's was exciting. Janie never could guess whom she would see on the next corner. It seemed everyone smoked and swore; Janie thought it made them seem more genuine.

Janie's brother Nate said Arnold was "losing it" - which is why he had to move in. Janie doubted Arnold would lose anything worth having in the first place.

Arnold coughed pointedly, and Janie abruptly moved her eyes from where she had drawn a small heart with a crayon the same color as the red of his flannel shirt, coming into focus first.

"Well, you finished yet, miss?" he asked.

Janie, across the butcher block table, covered the bottom half of her unfinished homework on reflex. "No."

"Finish it, I'm supposed to be watching you."

"No, grandpa, I'm supposed to be watching *you*."

Arnold and Janie glared at each other for a moment until the door slammed. When Janie's dad walked in, they both feigned intense concentration on their tasks. If truth be told, they were told to keep an eye on each other.

6 months earlier ~

Clark thought he knew everything, and Janie wanted more and more to tie his shoelaces together when he wasn't looking. Clark used to be *Janie's* friend, but now that he was in eighth grade, and she in sixth, he walked a few feet ahead of her with Nate.

Janie whistled and tried to kick rocks at their feet, but her aim wasn't very good, and they kept rolling into the grass.

"Will you shut up? The whistling is annoying!" Nate whipped around and glared at her.

“You're just jealous cuz you can't whistle.”

“There's no point in whistling. When's the last time you made a three pointer?”

Clark laughed. “I don't think Janie's ever made a three pointer.”

Janie scowled at their backs. She waited for them to get far enough ahead so she could give them the slip. They would be in so much trouble when they showed up without her.

They didn't notice her stalling, and when the gap grew large enough, Janie bolted into the trees. She took this short cut all the time to get to 7-Eleven, like all the other neighborhood kids. She didn't need to be escorted around like a baby anyway.

Everyone called the thicket *The Forest*, even though it was only a small remainder of what it used to be. Decades before it had been dense, children of early settlers were said to have gone missing after wandering further and further into the different shades of green. When the trees were tall, their leaves almost blocked out the sun completely, so once under their cover it was cool, and only the small blotches of light that came through would warm their skin, like a magic fairy wand.

Some thought that the original land owners casted a curse. They had worked it and praised it, truly loved it in the way that only their people passed down through the generations. When the women became round with new life, they never celebrated themselves, they got to their knees and let the branches and the bugs take energy from their bodies so that they both may be fruitful. They grew pumpkins that were so large two men had to be used to lift them, sunflowers that truly rivaled the sun for space in the sky, and potatoes that kept their young and old strong.

Eventually, they were chased out or murdered by settler's stronger weapons. An arrow was no match for a musket, but they still had a last resort, something that was unseen and clung to the soil, something that was born out of hate, and sought revenge before it even rose up from the dirt.

Janie let her fingertips trace the rough bark of the trees as she passed them. She felt the tall grass, through her jeans, and didn't want to linger too long. Last year, her friend had acquired a tick, and even though her dad triple checked, she still found herself itching for the better part of a week.

Janie stopped abruptly at the sound of laughter. She looked around but didn't see anyone. Walking a little faster, she wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans. It was always the hottest part of the day when they got out of school, and she found herself longing for air that cooled her cheeks.

"Hey!"

Janie jumped as someone's hand closed around her arm.

She whipped around quickly and saw a boy in the late stages of puberty, a thin mustache starting to grow on his upper lip.

"Where did you come from?" Janie demanded, pulling her arm from his grip.

He looked at her for a moment, before jerking his thumb behind him. Janie hadn't noticed before, but there were little hints of a hideout through the disruption of path and leaves. A trail was visible now, worn down by repetitive steps, back and forth, to the same destination.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I thought someone was trying to spy on us."

He smiled, pushing back the sweaty bangs that were stuck to his forehead. Janie decided he seemed nicer than most boys she encountered. His eyes were a brown, and they lightened to hazel when the sun shone on them.

She smiled vaguely. "It's ok, I wasn't spying. I was just taking the short cut to 7-Eleven to get a Big Gulp."

"We have drinks. Why don't you come hangout for a while?"

Janie hesitated, but she didn't want to seem rude. It was obvious she didn't have any pressing plans, and she was almost sure she had seen him before hanging outside the high school.

"I'm Steve."

"My name's Janie."

He took her hand and led her through the trees. "Watch your head."

It was a narrow opening, and branches scratched at her arms. It opened soon enough though, into a clearing. About ten teenagers sat on lawn chairs and tree stumps. There were beer cans scattered on the ground, and a sharp smell Janie didn't like thickened the air. Everyone looked at her when she stepped out from behind Steve, and she wrung her hands.

A boy with long, sandy hair spoke, "You caught the spy. Should we sacrifice her?"

Janie's eyes widened at the older boy, lighting a cigarette.

"I wasn't spying, you guys don't own the forest."

"Steve, if you had to babysit, you could've said something." A girl with bleached hair sneered.

"I'm not babysitting, she bit onto the hook, couldn't throw her back into the water."
"Wouldn't it be more like it," said a low voice from the corner.

Janie didn't turn to look, but stared at Steve, about to respond.

"What are you guys talking about?" the fake blonde asked before Janie could.

"I'm going to go." Janie started backing up, but Steve grabbed her hand again.

"What is your mommy, looking for you?" Steve said in a completely different voice than before.

Janie felt her chest tighten. Could she leave? Would he chase her? She was never a fast runner.

A few of the guys laughed. Janie decided to bide her time and wait till they were distracted.

"No.." Janie trailed off and walked further into the clearing and sat next to two guys in red folding chairs. They hadn't been paying attention to anything and stared straight forward, eyes red with their mouths slightly smiling. Janie wondered if they knew they looked like scarecrows.

"Here; have a drink." Steve handed her a beer, and even though she never had one before, she downed it quickly, tuning out the hum of everyone around her. She scrunched her nose and threw the empty can onto a pile of others on the grass.

"Someone was thirsty." The fake blonde said, this time not unkindly. "Have another."

Janie went to open the can, but it was already open.

"See, now were having fun." Said one of the male voices she didn't know. ~

Janie woke up, and everything hurt. It was dark, and she scrambled to sit up. She gasped, surprised at the pain that radiated through her body. She was still in the forest, but not the clearing. She glanced quickly from one spot to another but failed to get her bearings.

The trees kept tilting whenever she tried to stand. The bird calls sounded like snickering laughter, and she thought she could feel the bodies long buried, clawing at her from beneath the ground. She belonged with them, surrounded by dirt and bones, by an eternity filled with manic laughter. She was of the bloodline that deserved that, wasn't she?

Janie put her hands on her face and cried, her body shaking. The air had gotten cool and the sky's darkness looked down at her menacingly.

"Mom!" she screamed, as if a reflex. She wanted more than anything for this to be a dream, to hear her mom's heavy footsteps treading down the hall to her room.

Janie opened her eyes as the bush across from her shivered in the wind, but everything else stood still, as if it had not been touched. Something was materializing in front of her, the shape of a woman, elusive and shadowy, putting her finger to her mouth. The wind rustled the bush again, the leaves whispering, "Shhh".

"We tried to help but weren't strong enough, we stayed with you," the Shadow Woman said, right into her ear. Jane interpreted this language, even though it was strange and something she'd never heard.

"January Robbins!"

Janie froze at the male voice. Was it real?

"Robbins! January Robbins!"

“I'm here!” She couldn't muster the strength to call out again and didn't know if the words even came out until she felt a wet nose pressed to her cheek. January turned and let out a quiet cry of joy as a dog blinked at her.

Janie wrapped her arms around the German Shepard and wept. She didn't look up when she heard boots come closer.

“It's ok. We're here now, January.” The Officer turned and spoke into his radio. “ It's Murphy, Connie and I found her. She's ok.”

“Can you stand, sweet heart?” another officer asked.

Janie clung harder to the dog, who had its head on her shoulder.

She cried. “An angel. I'm with an angel.”

Janie felt wings wrapped around her and could see all the tiny white lights that helped grow flowers and make stars. She saw the Shadow Women standing in between the trees, holding babies in their arms.

The officers looked at each other with wide eyes. Murphy shrugged his shoulders in a “we've seen stranger” way and moved to kneel down next to her.

Janie looked at him finally, with colorless eyes.

“Let me take you home.”

Janie nodded, her hands still in the dog's fur, and she tried to stand. Her knees buckled and she fell back into the dirt, losing consciousness. The dog barked in alarm and licked at Janie's arm.

Murphy picked up Janie and carried her towards the cruiser.

“Angel, come.” Connie said, clapping once. She trotted over, and they followed closely behind the forlorn pair.

“Good job girl,” Connie whispered.

Angel didn't have a dog tag.