



A Night in the Woods

Three friends were sitting around a crackling fire in a remote campground far back in the Maine woods. Overhead, a full yellow moon hung, shedding a warm light on the dark forest. The boys had just graduated from high school three months earlier, and they were enjoying one last trip to their favorite park before heading off to different colleges.

“Where *is* everyone?” Cooper asked as he poked the fire. “Usually, this campground is packed in August.”

“I guess Randall scared everyone away,” Manuel said with a snort.

“Yeah,” Rob agreed. “Everyone watch out for make-believe monsters roaming the Maine woods!” All three boys laughed and shook their heads.

Only two other fires glimmered farther down the dirt road in the campground. One of the fires belonged to an old man named Randall, who had stopped by the boys’ campsite earlier to warn them about a crazy dog that was on the loose somewhere back in the woods.

“Word around these parts is that that dog is as big as a bear and twice as mean,” old Randall had said to the boys. “It can bite your arms and legs off with one snap. And what’s more, it can run faster than a car. And some people even say it can fly.”

The three friends had looked at each other quickly, suppressing their laughter.

“We’ll definitely keep an eye out for it,” Cooper had said politely. “Thanks for the warning.”

After that, Randall had wandered down to the only other camper, a tall man in a black t-shirt and heavy black boots, and appeared to

be warning him, too. The tall man listened for less than a minute and then shook his head. When Randall persisted, the tall man seemed to lose his patience.

“You’re the crazy one,” the man had finally said in a loud, irritated voice. “Why don’t you just mind your own business, you loony, and stop bugging people!”

Cooper, Rob, and Manuel had a few more laughs about it as they watched their campfire slowly burn itself out. The night grew unusually chilly for late August, and a far-off wind whispered through the trees. In spite of the fact that Rob had laughed the most at the idea of a giant flying dog, he now shivered and strained his eyes in the darkness to look for anything suspicious around the campground. The other campfires were nothing but dim, glowing coals, and the surrounding woods were deathly quiet. But Rob thought he could see the outline of the tall man leaning against a tree. Was he watching for the dog?

“I’m beat,” Manuel yawned.

“Me too,” Cooper agreed, echoing Manuel’s yawn. “Who’s taking first guard watch for the dog?”

In joking response, Manuel whistled sharply and said, “Come here, boy! Dinner’s ready! Fresh arms and legs!”

All three boys laughed as they crawled inside their tent and into their sleeping bags. But long after Manuel and Cooper had begun snoring, Rob lay awake listening. The distant whispering wind slowly seemed to rise to a howl. Was that a real howl or just the wind? Rob's heart began beating faster.

This is ridiculous, he thought as he forced his eyes to close. *I'm 18 . . . not some little kid who believes in fairy tales.*

But at that very moment, a shrill scream ripped through the campground's quiet. Rob sat bolt upright, his heart racing.

"Wh-what was *that?*" he gasped as he shook Manuel and Cooper awake. "Did you hear that? Someone screamed!"

"Dude, chill," Cooper said sleepily.

"Just a screech owl," Manuel mumbled. "Sounds like a scream, but . . . um . . ." Manuel had already fallen back to sleep. Cooper had never really woken up.

Rob remained sitting up. That had definitely not been an owl. And now a new eerie sound drifted across the campground.

Draaaaag . . . draaaaag . . .

And then, very clearly, another scream followed by a desperate "HELP!" echoed down the dirt road not far from the other two campsites. This time, both Cooper and Manuel

jerked awake and then bolted upright in their sleeping bags.

“What the . . .” Cooper whispered.

“Okay, screech owls don’t scream for help,” Manuel said breathlessly.

“Shhh,” Rob said. “Listen . . . there’s something else.”

Draaaaaag . . . draaaaag . . .

“What is that sound?” Cooper asked shakily. “Whatever’s making it is getting closer.”

Draaaaag . . . draaaag . . .

All three boys were silent for a moment, holding their breath and listening. The dragging sound had stopped, and the only sound was the soft rustling of a light breeze through the trees and an occasional pop from the dying embers of their fire. The crickets had all stopped chirping after the screams, but now they resumed their carefree midnight lullaby.

“Maybe crazy old Randall just had a nightmare,” Manuel suggested.

“Yeah. Everything seems to be okay now,” Cooper agreed.

Rob didn’t say anything for a minute. Finally he sighed and said, “Well, whatever that was, it doesn’t seem to be—”

GROOOWWLLLL!!!!!!

A hideous, deep growling and snarling was coming from just across the road. It was unlike

any animal or human sound the boys had ever heard. In an instant, all the crickets hushed. The growl was followed by a high-pitched, hair-raising howl that echoed through the forest.

“Oh, man!” Rob shouted in terror. “The dog! We’ve gotta get out of here right NOW!”

In a confusion of untangling sleeping bags, grasping blindly for keys, and scrambling out of the tent, the three boys dashed for Cooper’s pickup truck. It was parked close to the tent, but to Rob, it didn’t seem nearly close enough. In the fading moonlight, Rob gasped at the sight he saw when he dared to look in the direction of the howl. A huge creature stood on its hind legs not twenty yards away. The darkness hid the creature’s face, but its long arms were raised over its head, and its sharp claws were silhouetted against the moon.

The boys piled into the truck’s cab and slammed and locked the doors. Gravel sprayed and tires squealed as they roared down the dirt road and out of the campground.

“Did you *see* that thing?” Rob asked in a shaking voice. “That was no dog!”

“Was it a grizzly?” Manuel asked when he’d finally caught his breath. “There are some grizzlies that come down from the mountains sometimes looking for food.”

“No way,” Rob said. “It had long legs like . . . like a wolf, but it was standing upright. I don’t get it.”

“The only thing we need to get right now is out of here,” Cooper said as he focused on the road. “The closest town is ten miles away. We gotta get there and get help for whoever screamed.”

All three boys were quiet for several minutes. Rob wondered if the creature had attacked old Randall, the tall man, or both. More than that, he wondered if whoever was attacked was still alive. He doubted it.

“What’s the problem, Coop?” Manuel suddenly asked. “Why are you slowing down?”

“I’ve got the gas pedal all the way to the floor!” Cooper said nervously. “Something’s wrong.”

“What do you mean something’s *wrong*?” Rob asked in a strained voice. “We can’t break down! We’re still miles from that town, and if that thing . . .”

Clunk!

In a jerking motion, the truck shuddered and thumped against the road as if something was trying to pull it backward. Manuel and Rob spun around at the same time to look out the back window.

“N-no way,” Rob gasped. In a split second,

he felt his mouth go dry, and a rush of cold terror flowed through him. He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

“This can’t be happening,” Manuel said in a low, terrified voice. “Are we seeing things?”

Running behind their truck was the creature. With one huge paw grasping the truck’s tailgate, it was pulling at the truck and trying to make it stop. Now, in the red glow of the taillights, the creature’s face was visible. Rob was horrified to see the long snout of a wolf, a lolling tongue, and rows of sharp, glistening teeth.

“Slam on your brakes, and see if you can throw it off some way,” Manuel said desperately to Cooper, who was staring into the rearview mirror with wide eyes.

But now the wolf creature had crawled into the bed of the truck. It crouched low, peering into the cab with glowing yellow eyes. For a split second, Rob locked eyes with the monster. There was something about it that seemed almost humanlike in the way it sized up the window and then grinned. Suddenly, the creature pressed both of its huge paws against the window and howled. Then, with a mighty blow, it smashed the cab window. Glass flew everywhere, and the chilly night air blew in, along with the rank, deadly smell of the creature.

“NO!” all three boys screamed. Cooper swerved the truck wildly from side to side and then slammed on the brakes. With a howl of anger, the wolf creature tumbled off and into the weeds beside the road.

“Go! Go!” Rob and Manuel both shouted at once to Cooper. In a roar, the pickup took off again along the dirt road through the forest. But the monster, already on its feet and running, was quickly gaining ground. Closer and closer it came until Rob could see its yellow eyes blazing just behind them. It seemed to grin wickedly and then . . .

“It’s back! How did it . . . ? Oh, *no!*” the boys yelled.

With a giant leap that sent the monster completely airborne for several seconds, the creature landed with a heavy thud in the bed of the truck. Cooper did his best to throw the beast out of the truck bed with sharp swerves, but this time the creature held on. Suddenly, through the broken window, it reached wildly for Rob and Manuel. Rob could feel the hot breath of the wolf creature on his shoulder, and sharp claws raked his arm. Rob squirmed and struggled, but the cab of the truck was too small to avoid the wolf’s reach.

Just as the wolf fixed a painful grip on Rob’s arm, Manuel grabbed a soda bottle that had

been rolling around on the floor and slammed it down on the wolf's snout, shattering the bottle. The creature howled, released its grip on Rob, and tumbled backwards. But now it was terribly angry. After regaining its balance, the wolf reached through the window with both paws and grabbed Manuel around the neck, snarling and snapping.

"Do something!" Manuel managed to choke out. "Anything!"

Cooper zigzagged hard to the left and right of the road, but the beast's hold on Manuel kept it steady. Now the wolf opened its mouth wide and leaned in toward Manuel's neck. Slobber drooled on Rob's shoulder as Rob, in sheer panic, looked around the truck cab for any kind of weapon. In desperation, Rob picked up a shard of glass from the broken bottle. Blindly, he slashed in the direction of the wolf's mouth. A spray of blood whipped across Rob's face as the wolf jerked its head and yelped painfully.

Part of the beast's tongue had been cut off, and the second the wolf saw its own blood, it retreated to the back corner of the truck bed. It shuddered violently and then . . .

"What on earth . . . how . . . ?" Cooper sputtered as he slowed down and gawked at what he saw in the rearview mirror.

All three boys watched with disbelief as the huge wolf shrank down into the form of a man dressed in dark, ragged clothes. The man hunched over and held his head in his hands for several seconds. Then he winced at the pain in his mouth, glared with glowing yellow eyes at the boys, and leaped from the truck. Within moments, he had vanished into the dark forest.

“No way,” Rob barely whispered. “That was a . . .”

Rob was too afraid and in too much disbelief to finish his sentence. There was a long silence as the boys tried to catch their breath and comprehend what they had just seen. Was it possible?

“A werewolf,” Manuel finally said as he rubbed his neck. “He turned back into a man when he saw his own blood!”

Cooper just stared into the woods and shuddered.

An hour or so later, as the sun was coming up, the boys returned to the campground with two police officers and an ambulance for either Randall or the tall man—or both. The boys agreed to keep the whole werewolf thing a secret. They knew no one would believe them. They simply explained that they had been chased by what seemed to be a huge rabid wolf.

“Keep clear!”

As the police and the boys pulled into the campground, paramedics were already loading someone into the ambulance. A large puddle of blood shimmered in the morning sun.

“Don’t know if this old guy is going to make it, but he’s still alive,” one of the paramedics said to the police officer. “One of his legs is half gone, and the other one is pretty mangled. It looks like he was trying to drag himself to where the boys were camping.”

Rob suddenly felt sick. That dragging sound—now it made sense. He and the other two boys just stared at each other and shook their heads.

“Poor Randall,” Cooper whispered. “He was right!”

The boys looked toward the tall man’s campsite, where one of the police officers was leaning over a picnic table, looking down at the tall man, who just sat there nodding. After several minutes, the officer returned and shrugged at the other officer.

“Says he was in town eating when everything happened, and when he returned, he just went to sleep. Never saw that old guy in the road.”

The other officer scratched his head. “I’ll go talk to him, too.”

“Well, you can talk all you want, but he has to write everything down,” the officer said. “He had some kind of accident recently, and his tongue was cut pretty badly.”

A prickly shot of horror coursed through Rob. He glanced at Cooper and Manuel, and then all three boys turned together slowly to look at the tall man. He stood up from the picnic table and faced them. He folded his long arms.

A broad, evil grin spread across his face, and his eyes flashed with a sickly yellow glow.

