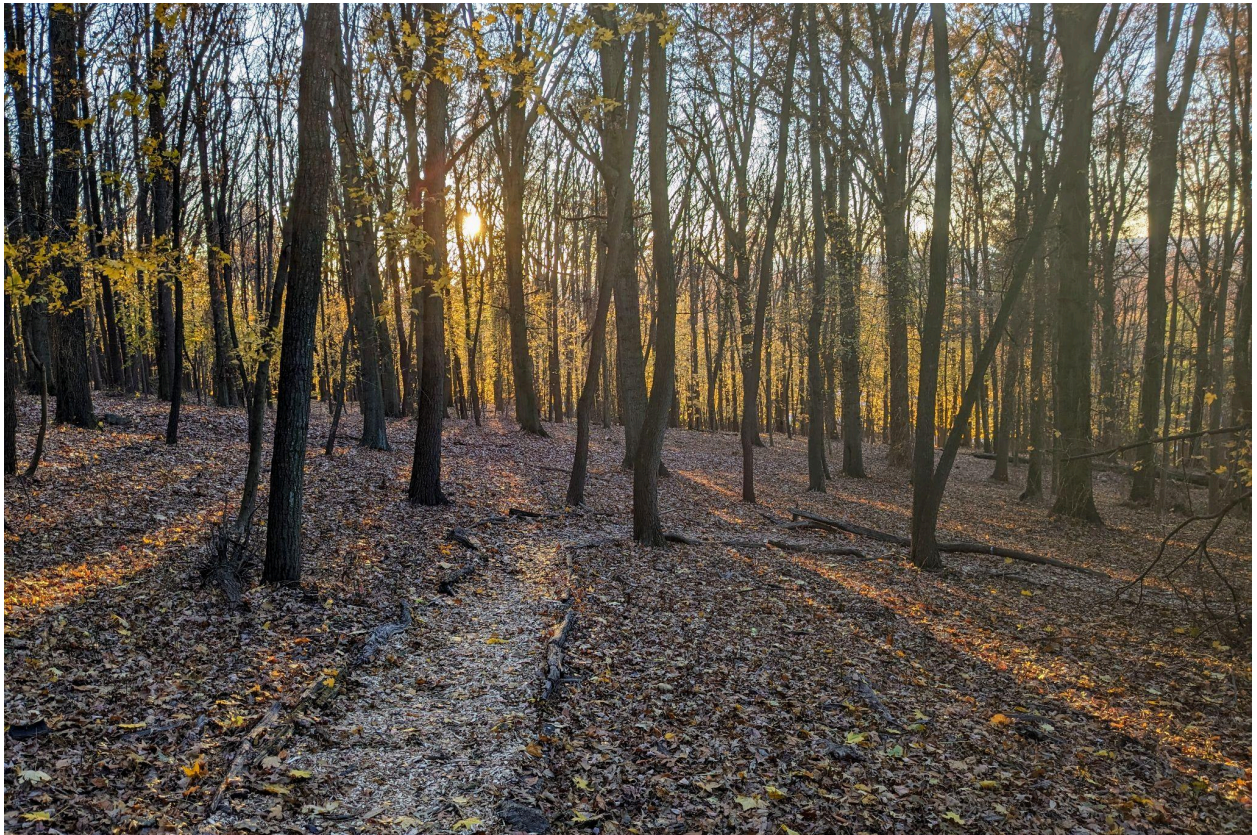


Out Of The Woods

a short story by Mohit Gore

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The more you get used to something, the bigger the ache is when that thing inevitably goes away. That was always clear to Marcus Chambers. It was not something that he learned, it was something that he always understood, right from the moment his toy car slipped from his fingertips and splashed into the pond when he was three. Another very clear thing that Marcus already understood was that the more you remind yourself not to do something, the more likely it is that you'll find yourself doing that very thing when you least expect it. Internal desires are powerful. So when Marcus told himself *not* to go into the forest, he suspected that one day, probably on a very bright and lazy afternoon, he would inexplicably find himself going *into* it.

He wasn't wrong. On a day much like the one he imagined, he woke up attracted to its strong allure. Despite the warnings in his head, he unlocked the door, opened it, and strode outside without a second glance. Right past the too-cheery maple trees and the rumbling clothing factory that sent plumes of smoke into the air. Within moments, the thick roof of crisscrossing branches peppered with orange leaves obscured the mellow sky and the halo that came with the rising sun. The distant honking of cars faded away to eerie silence. The teal-and-brown houses with their dirty window panes and glass doors were gone. Marcus was in the forest.

What could go wrong inside a forest? Marcus asked himself. Then he frowned. *No, don't think that. It's self-sabotage.*

Marcus adjusted the lapel of his flannel sweater, which had been thrown on at the last moment. Underneath it was his frog-hunting shirt. At least, it had a pouch in it where he once slipped dead frogs into, years ago, before his family moved into the little brick cottage on the corner of Stanton Ave. and Main St, next to the elderly neighbors who smoked in their front garden. Here, there were no frogs. But if the midnight noises from the forest were any indication, there were hoards of other interesting species here, practically begging to be observed.



As expected, the air was thick with a laden wood scent, but a fresher scent kept creeping into the air, an almost peppery scent emanating from the leaves of the skyscraping trees. Marcus kept walking along the beaten path, getting a whiff of it every now and then. It felt like everything was alive here, as weird as that sounded. The trees themselves seemed to breathe, their cylindrical chests rising and falling. It was a few minutes into his walk where Marcus heard a crunch of leaves from behind him. Upon whirling around, Marcus discovered it to be a black squirrel with a slightly transparent membrane stretching from its wrist to its ankle.

"Hey there," Marcus said, surprised. "I know what you are."

It stared at him blankly.

"You're a flying squirrel," he said, with the air of someone who had just made an earth-shattering discovery. "Could you hold still?" he asked it impatiently as it moved a little. "I'm trying to draw you, for Pete's sake."

No sooner than he said this, the squirrel twitched as though insulted and scampered up a tree at top speed, pausing every now and then to stare closely at him with beady eyes.

"Oh, come on," Marcus said. The squirrel blinked a few times, as though showing its affirmation, then jumped off and glided smoothly to another tree parallel to the one it was just on.

"Show-off," Marcus said, turning around to catch sight of a harp laying on the ground, where it had certainly not been before.

All light seemed to bend towards it. It was battered, its strings weathered and weak with time. The chocolatey-brown wood was strangely clear of any old dust, though. The otherwise smooth surface of the wood was interrupted by a jagged crack, as if someone had fixed part of it but had forgotten to complete the job. With a sharp blink of light, the harp fell over.



Marcus inhaled. Although he was not one to be shocked by odd things happening (especially not a harp falling over), he *was* wary of what came next. He knew himself, and there was no telling what he would come up with once he was in peril. And with magical, odd things, there was always peril. The world was full of magic; Marcus could tell from the ebbing of the Atlantic's foamy tide, from the little glances the forget-me-nots seemed to give him, from the way light beams seemed to uniquely crack and refract around him. But Marcus could sense that too much magic could lead to catastrophe, and as such, he exercised self-control in these kinds of situations.

Usually. This time, Marcus could not resist, and reached for the harp.

But before he could touch it, everything was thrown into abrupt darkness. Marcus wheeled his head upwards, as though expecting something larger than the Earth to be flying over it – but no, nighttime was just coming *much* quicker than usual. In fact, Marcus blinked and it was day again. In another second, the sun set and the clouds drifted far, the moon rose and the stars appeared. Then it happened again. And again. And again. Marcus looked around, heart racing. He needed to get out before something bad happened, if the stories were right. As he turned, the world around him shifted, and he was no longer in the forest, he was on a street, but not one he recognized. Streetlamps dotted the sidewalk like the serrated edges of a woodsaw. The sky was no longer timelapsing between night and day; it was firmly stuck at nighttime. Marcus saw, with shock, a single pale house in the distance with bright purple flames underneath it *floating in midair*.

Marcus stood, watching the house float up, and up, up. He smiled slightly and loosened his fists. An odd ease came over him. An acceptance. This was just one of the stories. He just had to wait a few hours, and he would be a storybook sooner or later.



“He'll be like me, sooner or later,” said a voice behind him. Marcus jumped, all ease gone, and wheeled around. A girl with long, dark brown hair, pale skin, and a single earring was standing off to the side, facing away from him. She was holding a flower by the stem – a rose coated in hardened gold.

“What?” asked Marcus. The girl merely raised her head, still facing away from him. A tense moment passed, then the house shot up and up and up with a *whir* before disappearing into the black skies. The humming of the streetlamps provided ambiance to an otherwise empty soundscape.

“Hello?” Marcus asked, louder this time. The girl tensed, as if about to turn around and strike him. Marcus sharply inhaled and observed her. There was a strange way she held herself, as if she knew something Marcus didn't.

“Hello? I'm lost...” Marcus's voice trailed off weakly and he waited for an answer. There was none. As a last resort, Marcus grabbed the girl's shoulder and spun her around. The girl turned to face Marcus, and he saw that the girl... didn't have a face. Where her face should have been, the flesh smoothed over, leaving a blank, flat surface. Marcus jumped back, shocked, and made a break for it. The faceless girl stood still, her entire body facing Marcus.

The more Marcus ran, the more his thoughts bled together. How was something like that even possible? No mouth? How did the faceless girl speak with no mouth? How did she appear out of nowhere? What was the science or logic behind this? *Well, there is none*, Marcus reminded himself. *This is magic*. Marcus was not one to assume something was a dream, or that he was crazy. That was taking the easy way out of things. That was a coward's path. Besides, this was too vivid to be a dream. No, Marcus had actually been in the forest; he *was* actually in the forest.



Marcus thought about this so much that his feet slipped, his heart jumped, and he stumbled over, right off of something. An Edge. Where the forest ended... where the *world* ended.

"Ahh!" he shouted, pinwheeling his arms frantically. "AAAAAA—" his voice was snatched away abruptly by the wind, which pressed against his face and slammed his eyelids shut. Forcing his eyes open, he could dimly see a cross-section of the world he lived on the surface of. He opened his mouth, but was treated to a gust of wind filling his throat. He coughed and spat. *Apparently, the world is flat after all*, Marcus thought as he fell, his ears making unpleasant windy noises. Marcus closed his eyes again, and when he opened them he found he was no longer falling. It didn't feel like he landed on something – he simply stopped.

He was back in front of the harp. Something had changed, however. The harp wasn't half-broken like before. This time, it looked good as new, the gold shiny, the strings clean, and the crack gone. Marcus looked behind him, and yes – just as he expected, a strange mist took over the land a few feet in front of him. Just to be sure, Marcus picked up a rock and threw it in the mist. Rather than landing on the misty ground, the rock dropped straight through it and fell past the insides of the Earth that Marcus could see through the mist. *That's where I was*, Marcus realized. The Edge had moved behind him, and the Harp had been fixed. But by who?

Heavy breathing behind him made Marcus turn sharply, but there was no one. Marcus took a big, calming breath, and looked back ahead. If a ghost wanted to watch him, he didn't care. That wasn't what mattered. Marcus began to walk forwards, then stopped himself. What was he doing? He wanted to go *out* of the forest, not further in. Marcus slowly turned back around towards the Edge.



“Oh,” whispered Marcus softly. The Edge hadn’t moved for no reason, it had moved to block the entrance.

Without warning, the Edge quickly moved towards him. Marcus straightened up, took another deep breath, and ran. However, the more he ran, the faster the Edge sped towards him. Marcus looked behind him and he saw the faceless girl somehow walking *out* of the mist. At the sight of his old foe, Marcus sped even faster.

It was only after ten minutes that Marcus felt safe enough to stop sprinting.

Victor Chambers took a deep breath and grasped the handle to his front door. Both his parents looked up. His dad took off his spectacles and began polishing them. His mother started to say something, but Victor gave her a pointed look and she closed her mouth. Victor turned the handle and walked out.

Victor Chambers had found a way to get into the forest. His research had paid off. He was going to find his brother. *Finally...* he thought, his heart racing. He had come to a stop right outside of the house. *Okay. Here we go. I'm bored. I'm very bored.*

Nothing happened.

I'm a little scared of magic because I've experienced it before, Victor thought.

There was no forest to be seen.

I want to have an adventure. I'm seeking danger. I'm seeking a reward. I want to be a character in a storybook. Make me a hero, world. Tell my stories in novels and paintings. Sing about my adventures for years to come. Make me a fictional character. Make me a fictional character.

Victor blinked, and the forest appeared in front of him. He had been expecting some kind of shimmer or sound, but no, it had just silently appeared in front of him. One moment it wasn't



there, the next it was. Victor ran into it without a second thought and as he did, collided headlong with Marcus, sending them both into a sprawling heap on the ground.

“Marcus!” Victor exclaimed, pulling his brother to the side.

"What?"

"I'm your brother, quick – we have to –"

"*What?*" Marcus took a closer look at Victor and saw someone a lot like himself, but older. A man. And all of a sudden, Marcus understood.

"This forest *is* magical," he murmured. "Does time pass faster in here? How much time has it been in the real world?"

"Thirty years. I was trying to find you all this time," Victor said. "I can't believe I found you right away. I really wasn't expecting that. But we don't have time to talk! I know what we have to do next. I've seen this a thousand times from my nightmares, it's also how I know about the –"

"Wait," Marcus said, brow furrowing. "You can't just drop a bombshell like that on my head. You said... *thirty* years?"

“Thirty years,” Victor said, grinning. "You must be really old in the real world now, right? This forest haunted me in my nightmares. Somehow, a little clairvoyance in me struck a chord of destiny. Or something. So I found information on the forest, how to get in, and I now know... I now know what I have to do now." All of a sudden, the faceless girl emerged from the shadows and saw two Marcuses. It was, as you may have guessed, quite a strange sight to a creature of its nature.

“Go!” hissed Victor, and he pushed his brother towards the entrance where he came in. The Edge no longer seemed to exist. The ground was solid again. Marcus fell through the



entrance, landing hard on his knees, and when he scrambled to his feet and looked back, Victor was gone. Marcus had been right all along. There *was* something perilious about magic.

He was greeted with a vastly different world from where he last saw it. The world was more advanced. New sights, new inventions, new advancements. The factory no longer existed. His parents were no longer there, but the key was left in the front door, oddly enough. And when Marcus looked at himself, he saw a middle-aged man instead of a skinny kid.

Over the next year, Marcus found himself working at the corner store, then the arcade. In the middle of one of his mundane shifts, he was struck with an idea. When he was back home, without really knowing what he was doing, Marcus began to sketch.

"I'm not going to be able to stop, am I?" he whispered to nobody in particular.

He was right as usual. December snow fell thick and quick across the town. A gaggle of schoolchildren ran by, laughing raucously. Marcus traipsed to a warmly lit office building amongst the dark and sad ones. He pushed the metal bar of a door and let himself in. There was a stout woman typing something on a laptop.

"Mrs. Sutton?" Marcus inquired politely. She glanced up and smiled warmly.

"Ah... Marcus Chambers, right?" Mrs. Sutton looked closely at his face. It felt strangely boyish. Marcus smiled and nodded.

"Right..." murmured Mrs. Sutton as she looked at a massive folder. "I reviewed your application, and I have a few –" Marcus shook his head.

"I – I want to submit my own stories to the paper, actually. I know this isn't how you normally do it, but I want to submit... my stories. And my drawings. Well, they're part-drawing, part-painting – in any case, I've written and drawn twelve." At this, Mrs. Sutton straightened up, a curious expression on her face.



"Twelve?"

"I have them with me. Would you like to take a look?" asked Marcus, motivated by her interest. Mrs. Sutton nodded.

Marcus took out his file of drawings, each with a scribbled caption, date, and title. Placing them neatly side by side on Mrs. Sutton's desk, Marcus anxiously watched her reaction as she observed the drawings. Mrs. Sutton looked up, a big smile on her face.

"I don't have the stories with me right now," Marcus said quickly. "I'm sorry."

"I'm fascinated, Mr. Chambers," Mrs. Sutton said. "These drawings are beautiful. Most folks who come to see me would give their right hand to do what you can do with a charcoal pencil and a few paints. That flying house is truly magnificent!" Marcus laughed a little to himself.

"I'm also especially curious about that harp," Mrs. Sutton said. "I'd be more than happy to take a look at the accompanying stories. We're about to close, though, so can you come back tomorrow? We can talk further then." Marcus thought for a moment.

"Of course, Mrs. Sutton. I'd be delighted. I'm glad you like them. Thank you so much for the opportunity. I'll leave the drawings here, if you'd like." Marcus smiled one last time at Mrs. Sutton, who lifted her hand in farewell. He stood up and left the room.

Nobody had ever shared the forest's secrets before. It collected victims of curiosity, not storytellers. Not artists. Nobody had ever escaped its non-Euclidean mazes of trees. Its constant movement – and the creature inside – made that impossible. Victor Chambers knew this all too well; his face was no longer his, but smoothed over. He was the forest's new protector, and he had a job to do. Nature has a way of dealing punishment. Some may call it cruel. Really, it's orderly.



To be “out of the woods” is an expression that means to be out of danger or trouble. Marcus Chambers was indeed out of the forest. But he was not out of the woods. However, Victor Chambers was. Out of the forest, that is.

The next day came and went. Elaine Sutton waited and waited, but the drawings never got their stories, and Marcus Chambers did not return. In fact, Marcus Chambers was never heard from again.